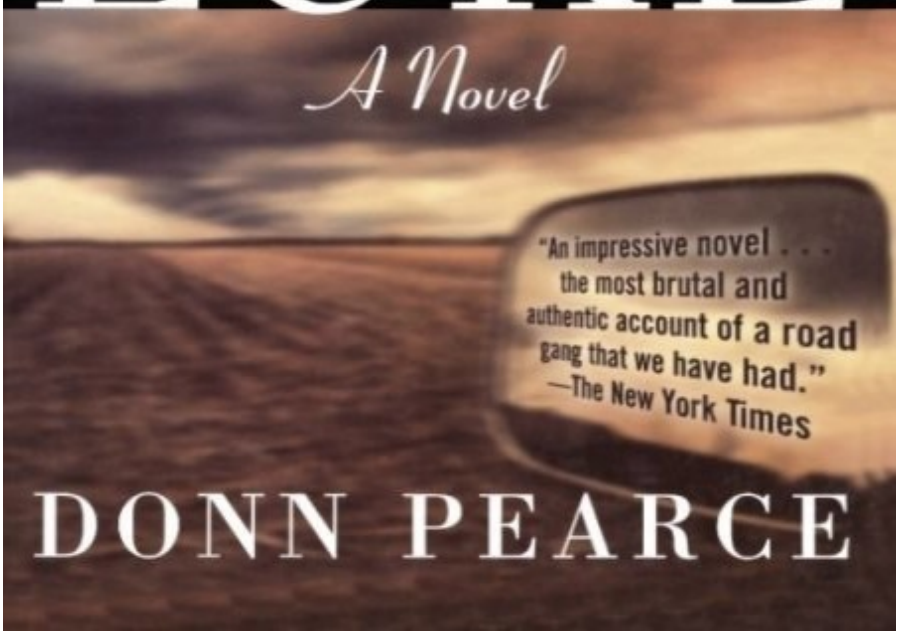
COOL HAND LUKE

A Novel



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1

EVERY MORNING WE COUNT OFF THROUGH the gate in single file, our voices echoing out into the darkness and into the glare of the spotlights on the corners of the fence. Once again the squads are reformed and counted as we stand at a loose and sleepy attention, greeted by a new day of trucks, guns, the hounds barking from the dog pens. At the signal we load up into the cage truck, scrambling in quickly for if we are slow the last man is certain to be kicked in the ass by the Walking Boss. It is still dark and misty, the dawn barely begun. The dawn is gray; as gray as this iron world in which we live.

After all the trucks are started the whole convoy begins to pull out, bouncing and clanging over the rutted clay road that leads through the orange grove that surrounds our camp. And as we are jarred and shaken through the darkness amid the squeaking of metal and the roaring of motors, the fruit on the orange trees goes speeding by like the globes of distant planets dangling in outer space.

The Bull Gang is always put in the cage truck. We can look between the bars of the gate and watch the headlights of the trucks behind us as they illuminate the leaves and the fruit and dazzle our sleepy eyes. And we can see the men of the other squads huddled together in heaps beneath pieces of old canvas, trying to break the force of the chill morning wind. All the other squads are put in the back of open dump trucks behind each of which is towed a small guard trailer with an eighteen-foot tongue in which the Free Men sit to prevent anyone from jumping off. Sitting behind the windshields of their black and yellow, two-wheeled chariots, the Free Men shiver in jackets and coats, their hands in their pockets, their shotguns held in the

crooks of their arms and aimed carelessly upwards at the stars.

And then the miracle. Without even pulling a trigger a star is being shot out of the sky. Through the bars we watch it burning, questioning its similarities with this caged world on wheels as the round pale orbs of our faces are softly illuminated by our own cigarettes.

We doze. The dream is still clinging to us with a heavy glow. Feet are shifted. Chains rattle. Work shoes scrape on the metal floor which is bare and shiny from years of being polished by leather and fine gray Florida sand. In order to relieve a cramp, someone shifts his shoulder, the movement felt all the way down the line, transmitted through a series of tightly packed arms and shoulders wrapped in the coarse gray cloth of shirts and jackets bleached and faded by the years. But as we sit here squeezed together, we are also huddling for warmth, for some sort of reassurance and understanding which we know we can only hope to get from one of our own kind.

Cigarettes are silently rolled and smoked. We cross and recross our legs, casually and debonair, the white vertical stripes on the outside of our pant legs barely visible in the gloom, dimmed by the filth and the encrusted salt of the sweat of yesterday's labor.

When the convoy reaches the paved road the trucks begin to separate, going in opposite directions and turning off again at other junctions as each squad is taken to the different work assignments scattered all over the county. Some of us in the Bull Gang peer out between the bars, noting the direction in which we are headed and trying to guess our job for the day. Eventually, after a half hour or so, the cage truck pulls over to the side of the road as we fumble with our makings to roll up and light one last smoke. The guards dismount from the tool truck behind us and move off to their positions. When they are ready, the Walking Boss unlocks the gate and counts us as we get out

and go over to the tool truck where Rabbit the Water Boy hands down the shovels, the bush axes or the yo-yos. One by one we clamber down into the ditch, stiff and clumsy at first but gradually loosening up as we go, the sun just rising over the horizon as we begin another day.

Slowly the mists begin to rise after the chill and the dampness are driven away by the sun. Later it begins to get hot and a man will pause, yelling out the prescribed formula to all the guards.

"Takin' it off here, *Boss!*"

From all around us comes the permissive echo.

"Yeah."

"All right."

"Go on, take it off."

The man drops his tool and strips off his shirt and jacket, leaving them on the edge of the road where Rabbit will pick them up and put them away in the cage truck. His tanned skin shining in its sweat, the man resumes his work, the dull monotony of the day dragging on as he digs and chops and carries.

The hours pass. But we are strictly forbidden to know the time, deliberately kept in constant suspense. There is always that haunting question. How much longer is it until Smoking Period? Until Bean Time? And how much closer are we to that Golden Day — the day of parole or release or, to some of us, the right moment for an escape?

But in spite of everything we have learned how to work with automatic unconcern, quite unaware of our own fatigue, of the fierceness of the sun, of the mosquitoes and flies. For endless hours we whisper to each other, keeping an eye open for the Walking Boss who is strolling up and down the road idly swinging his stick. He knows perfectly well that we are talking but is usually willing to tolerate our little sins if we keep them within certain limits. Our

work must never falter, our lips must never move and we must dummy up whenever he approaches, slipping back to the diaphanous silence of our dream.

During Smoking Period we huddle together on the slope of the ditch, telling each other all over again the long details of our former lives. And those lives, long since dead, sound like a distant melody played on a muted saxophone. We relate the history of our adventures, our sentimental agonies. We talk about the girls we laid, the whiskey we drank, the money we stole. And we tell the story of how we almost got away with it all.

Chief will tell another of his legendary lies. Ears will recite the saga of his boyhood when his father put him in a reform school after his mother died. But only his closest friends will ever hear about his young, attractive stepmother. And only once or twice has he ever described the exact details of that drunken night when he staggered home with a pistol and shot his father dead.

Once again Koko will describe how he got three years for burglarizing $115,000 worth of jewels from a walled mansion in Palm Beach. But he is still breathless as he tells how he escaped from a camp near Lake Okeechobee and ended up with four more years for stealing a pair of overalls from a farmhouse. And how he got another five years for swiping a Model T Ford in which to make a getaway.

And Dynamite is still having that same old nightmare. Living on Death Row, the cellmate of his dreams keeps asking him with maddening repetition,

“What time is it? We go down at ten o’clock.”

As for myself, what can I say? I too have committed my crime, the one which demonstrated my hostility towards this great, big wonderful world of ours; the one which has put me in debt to Society and which I am gradually paying off, on the installment plan. Lured by irresistible

temptations and maddened by a chronic anger which had long since lost its original meaning, I too committed a felony. Does it really matter that mine happens to be larceny? As for my sentence, I have all the Time I need.

And now my own face can be found among those paled by the shadowed height of the guard. I too am down there digging in the ditch while he stands with the shotgun jutting over his shoulder, hammered into the blue with a precise slant of malediction.

So this is the Chain Gang. Among ourselves it is most often referred to as The Hard Road, as a noun and as a proper name, capitalized and sacred. In the evening you can see us driving down the highway in a long caravan of black and yellow trucks heading back to Camp. And as we go by we get down on our knees in order to get a better view, our wicked, dirty faces peering through the bars to eyeball at your Free World.

Every night the trucks bounce over the clay road through the groves, pulling up on the asphalt apron, the guards dismounting and spreading to all sides. We wait. At the signal from the Walking Boss everyone clambers out and lines up along the sidewalk in front of the gate, standing with his back turned and his arms raised. Squad by squad we are shaken down, each man standing with his pockets turned inside out. His spoon, comb, tobacco can and change are all held in his cap which is always removed in deference to the Captain who is sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of his Office. After we are patted, rubbed and felt, the final tap on the shoulder tells us we may lower our arms.

Deep inside the Building we can hear the Wicker Man tapping and banging away to test the floors and the walls and dragging his broom handle across the chain link wire mesh of the windows. And that staccato melody of the evening echoes far over the groves like drunken jackhammers repairing the sky.

Another signal. The gate is swung open and we march through in single file, each man turning his head to speak over his shoulder, counting off as clearly as possible so the next man won't misunderstand. The Yard Man stands right beside the gate and a swift kick is the cost of a mistake. And as we count our voices are different just as we are different.

There are growls, yells, threats, questions, statements, murmurs — "ONE Two three FOUR! (five) Six?"

Once inside the gate we charge up the steps and into the Building, our songs and shouts overlapping and entangled as we run in to open lockers, to wait in line in front of the one faucet in the Building to rinse the mud off our faces, to take a quick piss in little semicircles huddled together shoulder to shoulder around the johns; two, three and even four to the bowl.

Then we rush out again, lining up for supper at the Messhall door. But the Silent System prevails. Jammed in tight on one of the benches I sit in meditation, feeling the shoulders and arms of the men on either side of me as I eat my meal of potato stew and beans, corn bread and collards. The only sounds are the scraping of shoes on the concrete floor, the clanking of tablespoons on metal plates. After I finish I go outside and rinse my spoon under the faucet in the yard and then I put it back in my hip pocket.

At the porch of the Building I stoop and remove my shoes, empty the contents of my pockets into my cap and get in the line which is wending its way past Carr, the convict Floorwalker. When my turn comes I hand my shoes to Carr who examines them for contraband and then throws them through the door. I turn my back and raise my arms as he pokes through the things in my cap, gives me a fast frisk and growls in my ear. "Fourteen." I go through the door, pick up my shoes and repeat the number to the Wicker Man. He grumbles back at me and makes a mark. Fourteen.

When everyone is safely tucked inside, the double doors are closed and barred. Just as the last bolt is shot home, the sun drops below the horizon.

And we always spend our evenings at home. Ours is a world without carpets or curtains, without chairs, sinks or privacy. Yet we shave every day and brush our teeth and somehow manage to carry on lives which, although but a pale imitation of yours, still retain some of its marvels. We read the funnies and know the football scores. In subdued murmurs we gossip and argue and recite. Four of us have been permitted to own radios that whisper the latest tunes. The four johns are always busy. There are loafers, comedians, gamblers, craftsmen and students. And those who still have someone waiting for them, are writing letters home.

So we build our Time. Each of our days is connected to the other by all sorts of personal artifacts, attached together by glue and by dream, nailed down tight by the hammering of our unanimous heels which respond to the First Bell by drumming on the floor all at once. In exactly five minutes we are ready for breakfast. The Wicker Man unlocks the outside door and then the gate to the Chute. Carr steps aside and we begin counting off, each of us twisting to speak over his shoulder. Like a key inserted in a lock, the line enters the dawn through the door to open still another day.

2

AND EVERY DAY IT'S THE SAME THING. Except that today there was a difference. We did the same work, felt the same sensations, exercised the same kind of talk and gesture. But the day was paced by strange silences and a deep sense of embarrassment. Noises seemed sharper. Movements were stiffer and more pronounced. And from time to time an eye would turn up, roll from left to right and then turn down again.

This morning when we went out, the Bull Gang was put to work on what we call the Rattlesnake Road in honor of all those serpents which we have killed there, using the rawhide-skins for the wallets which we make on weekends and sell to the Free World for spending money. The Bull Gang was yo-yoing the grass on both sides of the road, the shotgun guards scattered all around us.

But the thing was: the Rattlesnake Road leads to the old nigger church, the one across the road from the lookout tower of the forest rangers.

To you a yo-yo would be a weed cutter, a light frame of unpainted wood with a handle fastened to an A-shaped yoke that supports a thin, straight, double-edge blade. It is swung from side to side, slashing through the weeds with vigorous forehand and backhand strokes. But to us a yo-yo is the pendulum of that great invisible clock that slowly ticks away the hours of Our Time.

And today we covered more than two miles, working in a staggered line, each man behind the next and over to one side so that the lanes of work overlapped and so that if a yo-yo slipped out of a sweaty hand it would not hit anyone. We strolled along, shaving the shoulder of the highway and

the armpit of the ditch, swinging our tools back and forth in a fast but natural rhythm broken only when a clump of dog fennels or palmettos was particularly tough and a man had to hack away with both hands. Or perhaps we would come to a patch of sandspurs or Florida cactus and a man would be hit by the flying debris. Swearing under his breath, he would lower his yo-yo and pull the spines out of his back and arms but first yelling out to the nearest guard,

"Pullin' it out here, Boss!"

"Yeah. OK Gator. Pull it out."

All morning we swished along in our echelon formation like a squadron of airplanes soaring overhead through the blue, our yo-yos beating like mad propellers bearing us aloft. As always, the traffic roared right by us in both directions; the sedans and the jalopies, a farmer's pickup, a Greyhound bus, the semi's going by with their exhausts on high, their diesels pounding away.

As you rolled on by, soft and upholstered in your Cadillacs, heading south towards Miami and towards Paradise just beyond, you could look out from your air conditioned comfort and see the red flag stuck in the ground with the white letters *Slow Down — Men at Work*. Then you saw a guard standing at ease with his weight on one leg, his pistol hanging low in its holster, his shotgun dangling over his shoulder. Then the black and yellow trucks, Jim the Trustee carrying the water bucket with one arm held out for balance, more guards dressed in wrinkled uniforms of forest green and cowboy hats all sweated and stained, shapeless and worn. And all eyes were focused on the staggered column of bare-chested men, their skin burnt black, wearing striped caps cocked at every conceivable angle and light gray pants with a white vertical stripe down the legs.

You looked out at us through the windows, your eyes full of curiosity and disgust, your faces showing your fear. And

that suited us just fine.

A school bus went by, two kids leaning out the windows and hollering something. A State-highway patrolman cruised slowly along, followed by a long line of cars, the drivers all afraid of passing around him. Later came a house trailer from Michigan, an old jeep pulling an outboard boat, three army trucks in a row, a motorcyclist and a truckload of citrus fruit.

But we kept our eyes on the ground, absorbed in our work, for Eyeballing is punishable by being put in the Box. And we knew that today the guards were nervous. They chewed their quids and scratched their ears and rearranged their hats. They did all the things they always do. But they were watching us. They were waiting.

Patiently we swung our tools, the grass rustling with every cut. At the end of each blurred arc of flashing steel there rose a fluttering green cloud within which we dawdled like the sleepwalkers we are, lulled by the constant swish of the passing traffic and the subtle melody tinkling from the ankles of the Chain Men.

The hours passed. Every few hundred yards Rabbit the Waterboy would take the flag in front and walk up the road with it to stick it in the ground. Jim the Trustee would go back and bring up the flag from the rear. Then each of them would start up one of the trucks and drive it ahead to park and wait for us to catch up with our slow and ponderous advance.

Every so often, Rabbit would fill the water bucket from the big oak barrel in the tool truck, waddling as he went down the road. He went to the Walking Boss first, who took the dipper, drank a few mouthfuls and threw the rest on the ground with a splat. Then Rabbit went to each of the guards in turn, crossing the road and struggling up and down the embankment to offer them the dipper.

Then he went from one convict to another, each one

putting down his yo-yo and yelling out — “Gettin’ a drink here, Boss!”

“Yeah. Get a drink there, Bama.”

Eagerly the man would drink down the water, some of it running down his heaving chest and belly, ignored and lost in the sheen of sweat that glistened on his body and made his pants sopping wet and muddy. Again he would fill the dipper, pausing with gasping breaths.

Then he put it back in the bucket and resumed his rhythmic swinging, Rabbit dodging the flashing yo-yos, moving up to the next man in line who lowered his blade, looked around him at the armed horizon and called out — “Drinkin’ it up, here. Boss!”

“OK. Drink it up.”

Behind us or beside us strolled the Walking Boss, idly swinging his hickory cane. As usual, he gave us no sign whatever of his thoughts or his mood. Sometimes he would sit on the running board of one of the trucks or sit inside the cab. And sometimes he would light up a cigar and walk within a fragrant and inspired cloud, pulling out his enormous pocket watch and putting it back while we swung our yo-yos and looked down at our feet.

The time went on. Occasionally there would be a call.

“Pourin’ it out down here, Boss!”

“OK. Pour it out.”

Making sure that all the guards had heard, the man would go down to the bottom of the slope and drop to his knees with his back turned to the road, his shoulders slumped in a humble attitude, ignoring the passing Free World while genuflecting over the puddle of piss which slowly spread between his knees.

Then — “Gettin’ back here, Boss Brown!”

“All right. Git on back.”

Not long before Smoking Period there was a sudden yell somewhere up near the head of the line. I could see Stupid Blondie up there hitting at the ground with his yo-yo and yelling — “Snake! Snake!”

The whole gang came alive, men dodging here and there in a melee of swinging tools, trying to stop the rattler skimming through the grass. But no one could go more than three or four feet from his position, each one guarding his own area and flailing away as the snake zigzagged, first one way and then another. Once it almost got away under the barbed wire that bordered the edge of the right of way. But Dragline was bringing up the rear, working along the fence. Normally a Chain Man has the privilege of working on top of the shoulder where the walking is much easier. But of course Dragline was in a very deep mood today, suffering from a bad case of the Black Ass, remembering all the things that had happened on this road and remembering all the things that had happened before that.

When Dragline saw the snake heading his way he ran a few steps forward to head it off but his shackles caught on a palmetto root at the very moment that he swung his yo-yo. He lost his balance and fell to his knees, his yo-yo hitting the ground, sending up a geyser of dry sand and then bouncing off a strand of barbed wire, making it vibrate with a dull hum. Dragline tried to get up and swing again but the rattler had already altered course, heading back into the thicker grass at the bottom of the ditch.

Cottontop blocked its path and the snake swiftly contracted itself into a coil, his head pulled back, its rattles buzzing away as Cottontop yelled out — “Ah got ‘im! Ah got ‘im!”

Cottontop braced himself, nervously advanced a step, faltered as the buzzing grew more violent. Then he swung the yo-yo with both hands like the desperate reflex of a batter trying to hit a low foul. But he missed and ducked back just as the rattler struck, its body stretching out about

two feet, its jaws agape. The snake went back into its coil as Cottontop braced himself again.

In the meantime everybody was yelling, the convicts and the guards as well — “Git ‘im Cottontop. Git ‘im.”

“Git ‘im hell. Bite ‘im on the ass.”

“Watch it Cottontop. Don’t git yourself snake-bit.”

“He ain’t gonna git bit. He *cain’t* git bit. A snake’s got better sense’n to bite a Chain Ganger. With all the bean juice in Cottontop’s blood, it’d be the snake that’d git poisoned. He’d jes curl hisself up and die on the spot.”

But Stupid Blondie was wilder than all the rest, pulling his cap off and throwing it down on the ground.

“Cottontop! You be careful now! Don’t cut him up too much. You’ll ruin his hide! You hear? That’s my hide now. Don’t forget. I was the first to see him. I called ‘snake’ first.”

Again Cottontop prepared to swing and then flinched. The snake struck again, recovered, hissed and rattled. Cottontop stumbled backwards, came in again and swung.

There was a wild thrashing in the grass, big loops of black spotted yellow flexing and coiling as Cottontop yelled out — “Ah got ‘im! Ah got ‘im! Cut his haid smack dab off!”

“You didn’t cut up his hide, did yuh?”

Then the Walking Boss, Jim the Trustee and Rabbit came up the road from the tool truck. Jim came down the ditch slope to where Cottontop was standing and picked up the still-jerking snake by the tail. It was a Diamond Back. About six feet long. As Jim started back up the slope he made a movement as if to throw the snake at Rabbit who shrank back, his face grimaced with fear.

Boss Paul smiled and called over from across the road.

“What’s the matter, Rabbit? Don’t they have no rattlers up in Canada? Or is it too cold up there?”

And Rabbit answered with the imitation accent he has acquired, using the fawning inflections that are prescribed for a Waterboy, for a Yankee and a Foreigner.

“Yeah Boss. We got ‘em aw right. Lot’s of ‘em. But we made a deal. Ah leaves them alone and they leaves me alone.”

Cottontop was still explaining to everybody how he outmaneuvered the snake. Jim had already started to skin it with the pocketknife that trustees are allowed to carry. Dragline stayed in his proper place, examining the edge of his yo-yo with a frown.

“Damn your ass, Blondie. You made me nick my yo-yo. Ah oughtta make you give me a cold drink tonight.”

“How come I gotta give you a cold drink, Drag? You didn’t kill it. It was Cottontop who killed it.”

“Ah know that, stupid. But ah nicked mah gawd damned yo-yo tryin’.”

Cottontop was all excited at his potential reward. “Ah want a Pepsi, Blondie. Hear? A Pepsi.”

“Don’t forget mine, Blondie,” said Jim, looking up from his work.

But Dragline wasn’t through. “Ah oughtta hire me a lawyer and sue you, Blondie. For damages. Ah just sharpened mah yo-yo yesterday.”

“Aw, come on Dragline. Ah’m sorry. Ah couldn’t help it.”

“Sorry? Yeah. Ah knows you’re sorry. You’re the sorriest thing ah ever saw. But eff’n you don’t give me a cold drink the least you can do is sharpen up mah yo-yo at Smoke Time. After all, you git to keep the hide. It’ll make about six good wallet backs. At least. And here ah ain’t even got a lousy cold drink to mah name.”

“Aw. All right, Drag. Ah’ll sharpen it up for you at Bean Time.”

By then the guards had relaxed, their grips no longer

tight on their gun stocks. But we knew better than to go too far. There was a few minutes more of uninhibited talking and gestures and then the work was resumed, everyone taking his place without a word and beginning to swing his yo-yo, the Bull Gang slowly moving past the Walking Boss who stood on the shoulder of the road, leaning on his cane.

For another hour we walked along, swinging our tools back and forth, the traffic roaring along beside us. As usual, I was somewhere in the middle, lost in my daydreams about the past, once again going over all the things that I knew about Cool Hand Luke. And yet at the same time, more than anything else, I was probably worrying about the blister that was beginning on the side of my thumb, reaching out with one hand to slice away some milkweeds and then on the return stroke changing hands to trim a clump of grass close to the ground.

By the sun and by practice, we could tell it was nearly ten o'clock. Eyes began to question. The yo-yos began to waver. Heads slyly turned towards Dragline, who has a phenomenal ability to guess the time, searching his attitude for some sign.

The Walking Boss strolled along the edge of the road, looking at the passing cars, lazily swinging his Stick. With a slow and idle movement he pulled at the braided leather fob and looked down at his pocket watch. Slowly he stuffed it back and continued strolling.

After a long pause, lazily, with a deep, gutteral growl, he drawled out, "Aw right. Let's smoke 'em up."

Back came the reply with a sharp, high note of exuberance resounding from all directions — "Yes, suh!"

Eagerly we dug into our sweaty pockets and took out the battered, rusty pipe tobacco cans that we all carry on our hips. But inside is the sharp and bitter, iodine-flavored State tobacco that is issued to us once a week. Pressed down on top is a book of cigarette papers and a small box

of wooden matches. Some of us squatted on our haunches, West Florida style. Some of us sat, knelt or lay down flat on our backs. We rolled our smokes or stuffed our pipes, the clever ones always keeping two or three rolled up in advance in their tobacco cans so that no time at all would be lost. The wealthy ones didn't have to bother since they always smoke Free World tailor-mades.

For fifteen minutes we rested, drinking in the smoke. Again and again we went over the details of the adventure with the Diamond Back, describing every aspect to each other, every gesture, expression and emotion. We envied Stupid Blondie's luck, ridiculed Cottontop's idiocy, poked mild and careful fun at Dragline's tripping over his own shackles. And then again we picked up the threads of our stories and our lies exactly where we had left off, as though we hadn't been interrupted by several hours of labor in the sun.

But again there was a difference. There was a certain restraint in our voices, occasional glances of respect and awe in Dragline's direction.

Soon we felt restless. We knew the time had come, our eyes discreetly following the Walking Boss, waiting for that gesture. When he reached for his watch we all tensed. But he put it back again, unconcerned, looking off at we knew not what.

And then when we least expected it, his voice growled out to us, deep, slow and lazy, cadenced and intoned like a song.

"Aw — right. It's that time."

Stiffly we stood up, lighting that last smoke we are permitted to carry and snapping shut the lids of our cans and putting them away. Stretching, making the first few, meaningless swings at nothing to limber up, mechanically our arms resumed the rhythmic swing of the day, the sweat again beginning to flow, our eyes once again fixed on that

spot just in front of our toes.

3

BOSS GODFREY STROLLED ALONG THE EDGE of the pavement swinging his Walking Stick, a heavy cane made of hickory with which he points when giving orders and makes those little gestures that reveal to us his mood and with which, from time to time, he beats us.

Boss Godfrey is much bigger than any of us. He is nearly six feet six inches tall and weighs at least two hundred and forty pounds. Like the guards, he is dressed in the same faded green uniform of the State, a large spot of sweat showing between his shoulder blades and under each arm in a larger ring of dried salt. And like the guards, he also wears a cowboy hat, weather-beaten and out of shape with stains of hair oil showing around the band. But their hats are all various shades of gray. His hat is black.

Slowly he walked along the edge of the road from the head of the line to the rear and then back again. Gesturing with his Walking Stick, he would order the flags and the trucks to be moved up by the trustees. Occasionally he would mutter a command. Once he pointed his Stick right at me and then aimed it towards the rear of the gang.

"Sailor. Drop back and catch that clump of wire grass over yonder."

"Yes suh, Boss. Boss *Kean!* Boss *Paull* Gettin' back here and catchin' this here wire grass!"

"Aw right, Sailor. Go back and git it."

After doing what I was told I walked back to my place. Boss Godfrey was again ambling towards the head of the line, his back turned to me, swinging his stick from side to side and puffing on a cigar. Then he let go with a standard bean fart. A little one. The hungry kind. And once again I

wondered about Boss Godfrey and the other guards, speculating about their reality as human beings. But all I could do was observe them askance and at a distance, assuming that they must respond to the influences of food and rest, the state of their bowels and their loves. The well-being of the Free Men is something we convicts always worry about. Just as at one time we were quite concerned with the moods of our judges. Yet to us the Free Men must always remain as flat forms, shallow silhouettes cut out and pasted against the wall of the sky.

There are the rumors. Boss Godfrey used to be a Greyhound bus driver. His family was one of the pioneers of the Florida Territory even before it was taken over from Spain. His wife ran away. He squandered away a large cattle inheritance from his father. His girlfriend is a waitress in a juke joint near Vero Beach.

But we really don't know. We don't know how old he is or where he lives. We don't know where he's from, nor what he thinks or believes. All we know is that he is beginning to get a pot belly and wears sideburns and is a fantastic marksman with a rifle. He has little wrinkles on his forehead and on the back of his dark brown neck. And probably in the corners of his eyes. Yet we don't even know that.

The other guards have eyes of men. They have isosceles triangles of blue fire. Hollow eyes of iron. Brooding rips and tears and glints of green and brown. But the Walking Boss seems to have no eyes at all, keeping them completely covered with opaque sunglasses, the kind that have a brightly polished surface of one-way mirrors.

Boss Godfrey reached the head of the advancing column. He turned around and stood a moment, watching us. Slowly he began walking back. With a covert glance I looked up from my work as he drew close to me. And there in his eyes I could see the reduced twin reflections of the Bull Gang, the guards strung out with their shotguns at

various angles — over their shoulders, at high port, dangling in their hands or cradled in the crook of one arm — and we convicts herded together in the middle, our heads lowered and our eyes averted, our yo-yos flashing from side to side.

4

LATER IN THE MORNING THE COUNTRYSIDE around us began to change. Houses became scarcer. Marsh grass became more common, growing out of small ponds on both sides of us. The road was very straight, built on a high causeway of fill with steep shoulders that dropped down into drainage ditches overgrown with bushes. Our yo-yos had very little to do here and the Bull Gang began to move more rapidly over the ground, cutting down the occasional clumps of dog fennels and patches of weeds and then going on at a fast walk, moving in single file along the narrow tops of the shoulders.

Off to our right, coming out of the scattered second-growth pines and scrub oaks, we saw the row of poles supporting the arcs of high tension power lines. Later we could see the embankment of the railroad tracks. It drew closer to the road and then began to follow it on a parallel course.

It had been a long time since we had last worked on the Rattlesnake Road but we recognized the landmarks. On the left there was a small house all by itself built out of pale green stucco in the pseudo-Mediterranean style that was common during the great Florida land boom of the twenties. Then we saw the creek up ahead, the fish camp, the wooden drawbridge and its sister, the railroad trestle built of heavy, black pilings and creosoted cross-timbers.

For a moment we hesitated at the foot of the bridge until all the men had gathered together. At a signal from Boss Godfrey we started across, following the guard who took the lead, walking backwards a few paces and then turning around, twisting his neck to look over his shoulder. We

followed along, herded by the guards behind us.

On the other side of the creek the railroad began to curve away from the road, bending away behind the Negro general store, an old and dilapidated wooden shack. Beyond the store was the railroad station consisting of a bare wooden platform. On the other side was a nameless, unincorporated village of about a dozen unpainted shacks with rusty, corrugated roofs.

Again the country began to change, getting dry and sandy, scrub oaks growing in small groves mixed with patches of scrawny-looking pines. About a half mile beyond the bridge the road began to curve to the right, following the right of way of the Atlantic Coast Line. Slowly we worked our way around the bend. And then up ahead of us, emerging out of the trees that blocked the horizon, we could see the watchtower of the forest rangers.

Nothing was out of the ordinary except that everything was deliberately ordinary. Rabbit was ahead of us, carrying the red warning flag further forward like an advance scout carrying the guidon of a squad of troops. Boss Kean shifted his double barreled shotgun from his left shoulder to his right shoulder. Boss Paul held the repeater in the crook of his arm, looking at the Bull Gang and smiling. Boss Godfrey relit his cigar and strolled along the edge of the road, swinging his cane by the handle with one finger.

But softly, with the gentleness of grass fragments floating over our heads to settle down on our shoulders, there was a single word among the whisperings of tools slashing through the weeds, the scuff of footsteps and the rattling of chains, the traffic swishing along beside us.

“Luke.”

We could tell it was nearly noon by the position of the sun and by the feeling in our stomachs. There wasn’t much grass to cut and we kept moving at a comfortable pace, our yo-yos making easy, idle motions, swishing away at little or

nothing as we herded down the road.

Up ahead of us we could see the church. It still looked the same; a square frame shack supported on concrete pillars about a foot and a half above the ground, the paint nearly gone, the metal roof showing streaks of rust, the walls buckled and out of line. On one side of the building was a leaning brick chimney. There was a steeple in front but it had no bell, the hexagonal peak covered with weathered cedar shingles, dried out and split by the years and by the sun. On one side of the church yard was a tiny cemetery. On the other side, under some trees, were a few picnic benches made of old, sagging boards laid over two stacks of cement building blocks. The front yard was of loose, dry sand and there was a jalopy Ford in the middle of it, the paint gone, one fender missing.

The Walking Boss spoke to the trustees and they drove off with the trucks. We could see them park across the road from the church. Rabbit and Jim began to get things ready for Bean Time, stretching out the tarpaulins in the best of the shady spots under the scrub oak trees next to the church yard. Beside the tarps they put the lunch buckets of the Free Men and the crates which they used for seats. In the center of the ring of stations set up for the guards, they stretched out a smaller tarp, just big enough for the bean pot, the wooden chest holding the corn bread, the jar of cut-back molasses and the orange crate holding the big aluminum plates. And they started a fire and put on a can of water to boil coffee for the Free Men.

We were working quickly now, knowing for sure just how far we would have to go, anxious to knock off and get our beans. But as we drew closer we could hear singing coming from the church. Since today was Thursday it must have been a practice session for the choir. A tinny piano could be heard and a banjo and what was probably a trumpet. The voices were strident and hoarse, quavering in and out of harmony as they urgently pleaded and cajoled

the Almighty with their gospel rhythms of passive ecstasy.

Drawing abreast of the parked trucks, the yo-yos lost their enthusiasm. We waited for the signal, reluctant to go beyond our food. Aimlessly we shuffled through the thick, hot sand, cutting away at nothing, mowing an invisible lawn.

Boss Godfrey walked up and down, casually swinging his Stick. Eventually he dug into his watch pocket with deliberate, clumsy fingers. Then he growled out:

"Aw right. Let's eat them beans."

Back came the fierce, unanimous cry: "Yes Suh!"

Breaking formation we slowly herded across the road, waddling through the thick sand of the church yard towards our dinner. We threw down our tools, lit up a fast smoke, got a plate and stood in line, kneeling down beside the bean pot as Stupid Blondie served up a brick of soggy corn bread and poured molasses over it and Onion Head ladled out the watery boiled white beans.

But our faces were solemn as we stood in line, our heads turned towards the small rectangle of weather-beaten cardboard that had been inserted in one of the church windows to replace a broken pane. And as we each bent over for our rations we knelt in a kind of pagan genuflection. This was sacred ground to us and making us eat here was a deliberate act of heresy. For this was the very spot where they finally caught up with Dragline and with his buddy Cool Hand Luke.

5

AFTER WE FINISHED OUR BEANS WE sprawled in huddled groups in the shade of the scrub oaks. Rabbit had brought all our shirts and jackets from the cage truck and piled them on the ground. We sorted through the heap, identifying our own things by the big black numbers printed on the back and spreading them out like blankets. I got up and waded through the sand to get a drink from the water bucket and then I flopped down to take off the heavy, metal-shod State shoes and examine the latest cuts inflicted by my yo-yo. I massaged my feet and scratched the ant bites. The sweat and the dirt of the day had made mud inside my shoes, my feet shiny and smooth from the callouses worn by bare leather. Then I lay back and lit my pipe, using the shoes for a pillow and wriggling my toes in the air.

The others were dipping corn bread in the bean juice and the molasses remaining on their plates. Rubbing their spoons in the sand and putting them back in their pockets, they returned the plates to Onion Head who stacked them in the boxes. But I lay back and closed my eyes, listening to Blondie sharpening his yo-yo with the file from the tool truck and listening to the drone and accents of Dragline's voice as he started another story.

I lay there sucking on my pipe, pretending that I was never going to have to get up. The sand under my back felt like a tropical beach. Or like the thick pile carpet of a penthouse boudoir. I listened to the roar and the swish of the traffic going by on the road and I thought of those better days to come, of that time when I would at last be free to resume my life of secret poetry, bizarre crimes, nocturnal adventures scattered here and there.

As I swatted at a horse fly that buzzed around my face my eyes opened, then fluttered and closed again. Through the blur of my eyelashes I could see the watchtower on the other side of the road, the ladders and beams zigzagging up out of the ground. The gospel singers were still praying and chanting. And I knew that hidden eyes were watching me from the windows of heaven's back porch.

Out of the murmur of voices I could hear Dragline's loud, sing-song bravura going on and on:

"So a few days later ah met that there same son of a bitch. Ah met up wif him in a bar out on Flagler Street, see? Right away he says, 'Let bygones be bygones. Come have a beer.' So ah says, 'OK.' Ah'm gonna play it slick, see? He says, 'You ain't mad no more are yuh?' And ah says, 'Naw. Ah ain't mad.' So we sits at the bar and has a beer. But then the waitress went struttin' by and he turns his haid aroun' to eyeball at her ass and when he does ah takes mah bottle and POW! Ah lets him have it. Man, ah'm tellin' yuh. The bottle breaks over his haid. This son of a bitch falls on the floor. Everybody's hollerin'. And then you know what? You know what? That mammy jammer got right up off'n the floor and beat the livin' shit outta me right there. But ah kin tell yuh this much though. That there was a big son of a bitch."

But there was nothing ordinary about this particular bullshit session. Dragline was only Loudtalking for the benefit of the Free Men. His voice faltered, stopped and then mumbled on. Then he interrupted himself to swear at Blondie.

"Hey, Stupid! You got the nick outta mah yo-yo yet?"

Blondie was still down on his knees, the blade of the yo-yo on the top of the bread box and the handle braced between his thighs. Carefully he rubbed the file along the cutting edge, testing it with his thumb, meticulously taking off the wire edge on the back of the blade. Satisfied, he

went over and handed it to Dragline who inspected the edge with squinted eyes and a scowl. Then Babalugats got into the act.

"Hey, Blondie. What about me? I helped out too."

"Come on. What is this? The Slow Con? Yo'll think ah'm stupid or somethin'."

"Never mind that. Shut up and sharpen my damn yo-yo."

"Hell no. Why should ah?"

"Cause you're chicken shit if you don't, that's why."

"Awww. OK. Give it here. But it ain't fair."

"Why ain't it? You got a real good snake hide today, didn't you?"

Blondie went back to the bread box and began to sharpen another yo-yo, the file rubbing against the steel with a coarse, monotonous rhythm.

Again I shut my eyes and listened to the sounds around me. The Bull Gang was thoughtful and subdued today. There were no jokes, no playing the Dozens, the density of the usual happy bullshit extremely thin. Feet were shifted in the dust. From time to time there was only the sly rattling of a chain in the hot and sticky air. The file rubbed and sharpened. Matches were struck. The water dipper banged against the edge of the bucket and in a few seconds there was the splat of the rest of the drink being tossed out on the ground. Here and there was a murmured voice talking of sex, drink, crime, parole. And behind us I could hear the traffic swishing along as you and yours continued on your journey south.

Then I turned my head and looked over to where the Walking Boss had his tarpaulin. Boss Godfrey was lying on his back, his arms folded under his head, his hat on top of his chest, his Stick at his side. But his face was the same. Instead of his eyes all I could see were the two small mirrors of his glasses and the shallow blue reflections of a

pale and cloudy sky. For all I knew he was watching every move we made. On the other hand, he might have been sound asleep.

I could still hear the music coming from the church. Once I saw a black face peering around the edge of the window jamb. It withdrew and then appeared again, the white eyeballs clearly rolling from side to side. A few minutes later the music changed, becoming a deep spiritual sung with improvised harmonies, a mournful groan dragging towards the Infinite until a high, clear tenor began to separate itself, pleading and cajoling that God on high.

In the center of the Bull Gang sat Dragline, leaning on one arm, one leg stretched out straight, his other knee bent upright. Casually he smoked his cigarette, his eyes squinted, his gaze fixed on nothing at all. His face was relaxed into that affable, sleepy expression of a hound with the same sad lines angling down along the sides of his nose to become lost in the flabbiness of his fat, wide cheeks. Dragline's hair is thin and 'white-headed'. His eyes are pale blue, his big, bulging nose a continuation of his sloping forehead. His fat lips sag loosely forward, shapeless and obscene.

Between his ankles a heavy chain snaked through the dust, polished and shiny from being deliberately dragged day after day through sand and clay and over concrete roads. Dragline doesn't wear the usual paraphernalia of a Chain Man, the straps and strings that keep the ankle rings high up on their calves. Instead, he drags his chain, assisting the wearing process by walking along the roads as much as he can, tinkling out an iron melody wherever he goes. By now the center links are extremely thin, worn down to almost nothing after eleven months of hard use. Because when the Captain first put the shackles on Dragline he was told he would have to wear them until they fell off.

Dragline is one of the big ones, weighing about two hundred and twenty with massive shoulders, arms and

chest and a very heavy, protruding belly. Although not yet thirty he is absolutely toothless. The night of his arrest the detectives in Miami handcuffed his wrists and hung him over the top of a door. Then they worked on him with a piece of garden hose. But as soon as they took him down and his hands were free, Dragline took a swing at one of them, catching him right alongside the bridge of his nose and breaking the bone. Within seconds Drag was overwhelmed and knocked to the floor with blackjacks. Then they really gave it to him, working him over with their feet until finally one of the Dicks rammed the heel of his shoe into Drag's mouth, kicking and grinding until it was a toothless, bleeding, cursing and screaming hole.

Like all the outstanding characters of the Camp, he had to earn his nickname. When the Walking Boss brought in the squad after his first day out on the road, the Captain asked how he had made out with the new man.

Boss Godfrey's answer was loud enough for the rest of us to hear. "Ain't never seen nothin' like it, Cap'n. He can shovel more mud than any six men put together. He's like a human dragline.

But once upon a time, his name was Clarence Slidell.

He was a country boy from Clewiston who went barefooted and wore faded dungarees to school. The girls laughed at his big nose and his fat belly and to get even he pulled their hair and knocked the books out of their arms. After school his father made him hoe corn and pick snap beans until dark. On Saturday nights his father got drunk and beat him with his belt for neglecting his chores.

Clarence; the country bumpkin, the buffoon, the brawler. He spent his early years in and out of fights, jails, barrooms, automobile accidents, love affairs and courtrooms, paying fines to the city and county authorities as regularly as you make payments on your mortgage.

Eventually he learned a few angles while doing time at

the county farm, getting his education in the same way as the rest of us, absorbing the techniques, the warnings and the inspiration from the conversations of our peers. So in spite of his bulk and his clumsiness Clarence became a burglar, eventually specializing in motels. His Kilroy nose used to peer over the window sill as he watched the tourists go to bed. When they were asleep he would press his fingers against the window screen to keep it from screeching as he slowly forced an ice pick through the mesh and flicked open the latch. After easing the screen open he brought out his personal invention, a collapsible aluminum pole made of telescoping sections with a rubber tipped grabble at the end operated by a fine wire. It was like those grappling poles that grocers use to reach the top shelf. Clarence had it made in a machine shop in a large city several hundred miles away and then spent long hours out in the woods practicing with it. With this contraption he could actually open closets and bureau drawers, skillfully fishing for wallets, snatching purses, watches, a pair of pants from a chair, a pair of shoes from under the bed.

But then that cool, sweet, star-studded evening arrived. He was walking down a lonely country lane meandering through a twenty acre strawberry patch. Without any warning at all, the cops stepped out from behind the trees with their flashlights and caught Dragline standing there with six fur coats in his arms.

“Where you goin’ with them coats, Boy?”

“Where? Ah ain’t gonna tell yuh, where. But what ah’m gonna do is give ‘em to mah gal friends.”

“Six fur coats for one gal?”

“Not one gal. Six gals. A guy’s gotta have more’n one gal don’t he?”

But the cops took him in just the same.

And three gigantic detectives with Panama hats and pastel Palm Beach suits came in to ask him a few questions.

Today Dragline sat there in the churchyard with the ease and bearing of the captive monarch of a savage tribe. He was the very focus of the Bull Gang, the epicenter of a circle of dirty, exhausted men, surrounded by a sprinkled perimeter of stripes, eyes, sharp blades and naked muscles.

Dragline — our very own.

It was only a matter of time. Everyone knew it was coming. We all knew that someone would ask the question and that Dragline would have to answer it. Finally it was Cottontop who broke the embarrassed silence.

“Hey Drag? Drag? Is this here the place? Ah mean. Right here?”

Dragline was rolling a cigarette. He nodded his head just once before wetting the edge of the folded paper with his tongue.

Loudmouth Steve chimed in, unable to control his adolescent enthusiasm and his lack of discretion.

“Right here? Inside that church yonder? That time when you and Luke took off and run?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Mister Steve. Right here.”

“How did it happen, Dragline?” asked Stupid Blondie.

“Aw. It’s a long fuckin’ story. ‘Sides. You know it already anyhow.”

And then Onion Head broke in.

“But we don’t know all that happened, Dragline. And some guys weren’t even here then.”

“Come on, Drag, urged Cottontop. Come on and tell us.”

Muttering under his breath, Dragline gave a few last shaping strokes of his fingers on the cigarette. Then he struck a match and pouted his lips as he leaned his face into the flame. Inhaling deeply, he slowly and thoughtfully let the bitter smoke escape from his nose and mouth in controlled wisps.

“Luke? Yeah. That son of a bitch —. If he’d a-listened to me like ah tole him —.”

Dragline glanced at the Walking Boss, his voice dropping and becoming a murmur, his eyes flitting around the church yard at the ghosts flickering in the patches of sunlight and shade. Inside the shack the choir was just hitting its stride, beginning to warm up their gospel mood.

Mumbling at first, his words slowly grew bolder as he got into the story. Accompanied by the background of folk music and the sounds of the traffic, of rattling chains and sharpened metal, Dragline sat there today and recited the song and the story of Cool Hand Luke.

6

BUT ACTUALLY DRAGLINE BEGAN TELLING the story somewhere in the middle. Or at least it was the middle as far as I was concerned. Because I was really the one who first became aware of Luke's existence. I recognized his heroic aspects long before he even arrived at our camp. I sensed his poetry. And I knew that he was coming to save us all.

His arrival was heralded well in advance on the front page of the Tampa Daily Times. The image of Luke's face was borne on the wind to land right there in the ditch, his handsome features crinkled and gray, his somber eyes staring out of the weeds to contemplate the sunny skies above.

It had been an unusual day, the Bull Gang assigned to one of those odd chores that the Captain invents from time to time to keep us occupied. We had had a very long ride that morning, all the way up to Mineola. Then we were lined up on both sides of Route Number Twenty-five from the pavement to the edge of the right of way. At Boss Godfrey's signal we moved forward, bending over to pick up every scrap of trash, every cigarette package, beer can, bottle and paper bag. We walked and we bent over and we dumped our handfuls of trash in regular piles for the trustees to burn as they followed along. It was a long, hard day at full gallop, the guards following along beside and behind us. By the time we were ordered to load up into the cage truck we had reached the Polk County line, eighteen miles away.

But along about eleven o'clock an open red Jaguar had come roaring by, the driver wearing horn-rimmed glasses

and a beret, turning his head to grin back at us as he deliberately tossed a newspaper over his shoulder. The pages separated in the wind and tumbled loosely along the shoulder of the road, rustling and crinkling as it followed the direction of the departing car. And it was my luck to be the one to come across the front page, cursing my delivery boy, bending over to grab it up along with my other souvenirs of the tourist season. But then my eye caught the headline: *War Hero Becomes Parking Meter Bandit*

I hesitated. This was a new type of crime to me and I was immediately intrigued. Quickly I got hold of the other sheets, folded them together as best I could without falling behind the advancing line and held the paper up in the air as I called out to the nearest guard, “Boss Paul! Puttin’ it in my pocket here!”

“Aw right, Sailor. Put it in your pocket.”

At noon we had our beans in an orange grove. I put the newspaper in proper order and stretched it out on the ground, reading it as I ate. Some copy editor had played up the ‘before and after’ angle. Two photographs were printed side by side; the one a formal military portrait, the kind we all sent home during the war, face scrubbed, tanned and shiny, uniform correct, hat squared, chest out and bedecked with bits of colored ribbon and metal badges — the other the picture of a drunk peering through the bars, hair disheveled, shirt open and dirty. But instead of sticking to his role of the Scowling Criminal, the ex-soldier was smiling directly into the camera, one eye closed in a sly wink.

I read the story and then read it again, translating it by sight as I scanned the lines, filling in the obvious gaps, shrinking the exaggerations, deducting the half-truths and the prejudices, correcting the misinformation about things I knew of and trying to imagine the truth of the things I didn’t, the facts that were unstated, the events that were undescribed, the elements that were ignored or those taken

out of context and slanted by clever wording to give a predetermined impression.

But I smiled as I read the story. I liked the face of this Lloyd Jackson, twenty-eight, born in Birmingham, Alabama, infantry veteran of three major campaigns during the big war, the one that established the Four Freedoms once and for all. He was a holder of two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star. But he had no Good Conduct Medals. He had been given company punishment on a number of occasions and had served sixty days in a disciplinary battalion for going AWOL. After three and a half years of service, three years of which were overseas, he was discharged as a private.

I showed the paper to Dragline who read it with a studied frown, his lips sagging loose and open. Koko came over and squatted beside him, his eyes wide, his grin broad and nervous. Koko began to insert bits of information and interpretations of his own, embellishing the story out loud. Dragline growled at him a couple of times but it did no good.

"Shut up, willya? Ah'm readin'."

"Yeah. I know. I'm readin' too."

"Naw, you ain't. You're makin' it all up as you go."

"I'm just sayin' how it really was."

"How the hell do you know how it was?"

"Aw, you can tell. This guy's cunt sent him a Dear John and so he started hittin' the bottle, see? Probably a little punchy too, from too much combat and all. And he was a tough bastard, you know? Wouldn't never take no shit from nobody. So one night he got fed up with this Square John job he had and he —"

"Jes shut up. Let me read the gawd damn thing."

"Come on Drag! Don't pull it away. I want to read too."

"Well read then. And shut the hell up."

So long before Jackson arrived at our camp, before he even knew what The Hard Road was, before he had even been tried and sentenced, he had already become a legend to the Bull Gang, his influence stirring our imaginations and quickening our hearts. For the rest of the afternoon we thought about him as we walked beside the highway stooping over to pick up trash, ignoring our aching backs, ignoring the roaring traffic, the sun, the guards, ignoring our fate and our time.

It was as though we were casually strolling along Franklin Street in Tampa late one night after everything was closed up, no cars parked along the curbs, the sidewalks empty, the shop windows glowing with serene displays of luxuries appreciated by no one but ourselves. And we were drunk, all tanked up on beer and wine and whiskey and the whole town was soft and dim and lovely.

Suddenly a pick-up truck came zooming down the street. A sign on the door of the cab read 'Acme Plumbing Service'. But Jackson was driving it hell-for-leather, as though it were a scout car entering a bombarded city on the heels of the retreating enemy. He jammed on the brakes, the rear end swinging around. Then he sat there, staring through the grime of the windshield, the street lights and traffic signals glowing through the dimness of his intoxicated mind.

All he could see were the green benches and the parking meters spaced along the curbs. He realized that they were advancing, marching forward in open ranks, a battalion of emaciated soldiers with ugly faces beneath odd-shaped foreign helmets. And across the forehead of every one of them was tattooed in red letters the word VIOLATION.

Jackson shut his eyes, opened one of them and squinted. Then he tried squinting the other eye. Leaning his elbow on the steering wheel and resting his chin in his hand he pondered the tactical situation. Had he done a violation? Did he dare make a violation? Had a violation been

committed against him? And how does it come about, these god damned violations? Is a violation done to you — are they made — or do you commit them? And he growled deep down in his throat. He opened the door, put one foot on the running board and leaned out, yelling down Franklin Street.

"Look out, you bastards. You can't challenge me that-a-way. I got a pass. Signed by the old Provost Marshal himself. Yeah. Ole Chicken Shit Williams. *Ker-nel* Chicken Shit, I mean."

He got back in the cab and gripped the wheel with both hands, lowering his head and glaring through the windshield.

"Look at 'em. Fuckin' bastards. All lined up and blinkin' their bloodshot eyes at me. In a perfect enfilade position too. If I had me a BAR —. I'll show 'em though. Violation, huh? I'll show 'em some *real* violations."

Putting the truck in gear, he started forward with a jerk, stalled the motor, cursed out loud and started it again. Roaring ahead for half a block, he slammed on the brakes, skidded to a stop and leaped out of the cab, the motor still running as he dashed over to the curb, spit at one of the parking meters and fumbled in his pocket for a ring of keys. There was a big metal tool box bolted to the side of the truck just behind the cab. Jackson leaned forward to put the key in the padlock, lost his balance, swore and kicked the door of the box. He tried it again, got it open and noisily turned over the heap of tools inside, a clattering pile of wrenches, hammers, taps, dies and star chisels. He found the pipe cutter, pulled it out of the clanking heap and slammed the door of the tool box.

Trying to hold himself erect, he marched forward, his shoulders slanted over to one side as he stumbled over the curb holding the heavy tool in his hand. He stood in front of one of the meters that had a square sign attached to the

pipe that supported it, listing in green letters the regulations about parking in that spot.

Jackson grinned, then scowled with cunning malice. — "OK. Mister General, you son of a bitch. Sir. You think you can straighten everything out with an old beat-up silver dollar with a peppermint stripe ribbon hangin' on it? Is that it? Speak up, man! Chin in! Chest out! Count cadence, loud and clear. So you gave me your fuckin' medal and now everything's just copacetic. Well, I gotta cut your god damned head off. It's a matter of principle. It's my god damned patriotic duty. But don't worry. They'll give you the Medal of Honor. For sure. Post-humorously. With crossed turds on a field of gold."

Jackson clamped on the pipe cutter, screwed it up tight, pulled it around two or three times, tightened up the adjusting handle a bit more and turned it again. In less than half a minute the meter came loose in his hands and he threw it into the back of the truck.

"OK. Load up, General. The convoy's movin' up. We gotta make contact with the enemy before dawn."

Jackson staggered up to the next parking meter. — "OK. Helen. Off comes that pretty little head."

Quickly he adjusted the pipe cutter, made two jerking turns, missed when he grabbed for the handle and staggered backwards a few steps. He wobbled back and forth a little, got his bearings and wagged his finger at the next meter in line.

"Don't worry sergeant. I'll be with you in a minute. Stand at ease there while I settle a domestic situation over here."

Breaking out in a sweat in the hot, sticky air, his breathing became labored, his voice hoarse with the ferocity of his exertions.

"OK. Kitten. Sorry to do this. But I lost my head over you. Now it's your turn."

So he went. He left the motor of the truck running, the door open, the headlights illuminating his work. One after the other he proceeded south down the main shopping district of the town.

Methodically he piled the meters together along the curb and every so often went back to drive up the truck, throwing in the meters with a tremendous bang and clatter, pausing every now and then to look down at the trophy in his hands, shake it and mutter, “Well, Colonel Chicken Shit. Sounds like you got a screw loose here and there. Better have you examined. Can’t have no Section Eights runnin’ around in this outfit. Right?”

Down the sidewalk a city cop came sauntering along his beat, twirling his club. He saw the truck of one of the municipal maintenance people up ahead, tested the door of a bank building, a clothing store and then a jewelry shop. When he came abreast of the maintenance man he muttered a friendly, “Evenin’.”

“Howdy, answered the man who went on with his work. The cop walked on a few feet and then turned to watch the proceedings. The man grunted as he turned the cutter with jerking pulls, putting his shoulders behind it and catching the meter as it came loose. Then he began singing the old hillbilly song, *Little Liza Jane*.

The cop stood by, swinging his club and watching. But it was a late hour for a city employee to be working. On the other hand a good deal of maintenance work is done at night. But why are they removing the parking meters on Franklin Street? Lord only knows what the Big Wheels will decide to do next. Seems like they’d say somethin’ anyhow so’s a body’d know what was goin’ on. But what was goin’ on?

“Hey fella. What are you doin’ anyway?”

Jackson continued with his work, pulling the cutter around with smooth, even jerks and tightening the handle

every so many turns. Without looking at the cop, he answered, “I’m cuttin’ off this parkin’ meter. What does it look like?”

“Oh. Yeah. But — who are you?”

“I’m Lloyd Jackson.”

“Yeah — *but who are you?*”

“I dunno. You might say I was a parkin’ meter bandit.”

Jackson walked right past the cop, threw the meter into the back of the truck and walked up to the next in line. The cop shuffled his feet.

“Listen. I think maybe you’d better come with me.”

“I can’t. I ain’t finished this block yet.”

“Yeah, but you can come back. You can always come back later. I gotta check this here deal.”

“How come? What’s there to check?”

“Well — never mind. Come on. Let’s go.”

“If you say so — officer — sir. Here. Hold this.”

Jackson handed the cop the pipe cutter and walked around to the front of the truck. The cop took the offered tool, staring down at it in his hands.

“Hey, what are you doin’?”

“I gotta park my truck don’t I? I ain’t gonna leave the motor runnin’ for some thief to just come and help himself.”

Before the cop knew what was happening, Jackson was in the cab. He shifted gears, gunned the motor and roared down the street at top speed.

“Hey! Stop! Come back here! *Halt! Halt!*”

The cop dropped the pipe cutter and yanked out his pistol. He aimed up at the sky and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. Then he squeezed again and yelled out his challenge, his voice loud and echoing down the empty

street.

"*Halt!* In the name of the *Law!*"

Looking at his pistol, he snapped off the safety and started to aim at the fleeing truck. But this time he squeezed the trigger too quickly. The gun went off with a tremendous noise, the window of a second story dentist's office collapsing in a rattle of glass fragments.

Quickly the cop began firing. The bullets cracked and whined as they ricocheted off the street, the curb, and then a *No Parking* sign. Jackson turned a corner, just in time for the last bullet to hit the front left tire. The steering wheel wrenched itself out of his hands, the truck bouncing over the curb and across the sidewalk, crashing with a splintering roar through the plate glass window of a closed restaurant, crushing tables and chairs and finally coming to rest after jarring the end of the counter out of place and tearing the fastenings out of the floor.

The cop came running up, out of breath, fumbling with trembling fingers as he tried to reload his pistol and run at the same time. He dropped several bullets along the way, swore, started to pick them up, hesitated, ran on. Coming to the restaurant, he cautiously stepped inside, his shoes crunching on broken glass, crouching carefully as he approached the truck.

There was a long pause. Then the door to the cab clicked open and Jackson slowly and laboriously climbed out, humming under his breath.

"Stop! Stay right where you are!"

Jackson ignored the cop. It was as though he hadn't heard him as he fumbled in his pocket for some change, rubbed his nose with his fingers and gingerly felt the cut on his forehead. He looked at the blood on his fingertips, tasted it with his tongue and then wiped it off on his pants.

Staggering ever so slightly and favoring his left leg, he went over to the juke box in the corner and dropped in a

quarter, hesitating over the buttons as he scanned the titles.

But the cop insisted.

“Hey! Come on, you!”

Jackson punched one button after another, frowning and squinting his eyes as he considered each of his selections. The cop was shaking with frustrated rage.

“Come on! God damn it! You’re under arrest! Get ‘em up!”

The juke box burped, swallowed and groaned. It began to come alive with glowing, bubbling colors. Levers clicked, gears meshed, a disc was removed from a rack visible through the glass front, placed on the table and started turning. The playing arm moved over, setting the needle in the proper groove. Then a quartet of gospel singers began a vigorous hymn accompanied by a complicated harmony of banjos and guitars picking and strumming in the background.

“Oh Lawd! Ah’m a-comin’, a-comin’ to that Angel La-and!”

Snapping his fingers and shaking his lowered head with ecstasy, Jackson shuffled over the broken glass and splintered wood, dancing out onto the sidewalk as the cop followed behind him with his pistol, tremulous and agitated.

And so Jackson committed his very own crime and was brought before the wrath of the Law. He left behind him an anguished chorus of forlorn voices praying over an abandoned city as he danced his way heel and toe right over the debris and into his cell.

7

IT WAS ABOUT THREE WEEKS AFTER THAT when Boss Paul showed Rabbit an item in the Orlando paper about the trial of a man called Lloyd Jackson. And of course we heard all about it that night in the Building. The article repeated the story that I had found in the bottom of the ditch and went on to list the details of his army record.

The court-appointed lawyer entered a formal plea of guilty and Lloyd Jackson was sentenced to two years at hard labor at Raiford.

Today in the church yard I lay back and remembered how it was when I was sent up from the county jail, a long chain of us handcuffed together and put into the panel delivery truck that is known as the Newcock Bus. There was that long, hot ride up to Raiford, the two lines of men facing each other, knees almost touching. Some managed to be wild and carefree, with the same horseplay and slaphappy jokes of fresh conscripts going into the army or a busload of freshmen going off to school. Others were silent and smoked in sullen brooding. Others craned their necks to peer through the wire mesh barrier that separated us from the driver and guard in order to get their last few precious glimpses of the Free World. Everyone was hot and thirsty, terrified and ashamed. The years of our Time rang in our heads like bells. The realization of the sufferings to come sat on our stomachs like heavy weights. Yet all we could do was sit there, thinking back over the past and trying once again to beat that old prisoner's game of determining at just what point we made our big mistake.

It is an ordinary day like any other when you take the Newcock Bus up to Raiford. The sun shines, the motor

roars, the wheels bounce over every crack in the road. The billboards sell their beer and cigarettes and people drive by in their cars. But the big difference is when you reach for your matches and smokes and you have to drag another man's hand with your own over to your pocket and as you strike a match and lean into the flame there are four hands framing your face.

Raiford —

Gleaming white walls set in a triple spider's web of shining, galvanized chain link fences. Long lines of men coming down the roads from the fields, haggard, in filthy wrinkled uniforms, half of them unshaved, all of them gaunt and hopeless. They limp and drag their feet, they saunter and swagger, they stroll and clump and march. But their heads turn as the truck passes by and they see the eyes peering through the small barred window in the back door. And in those lines of men you can see the faces dampened by the sour suns of years and years — faces made of mud, out of straw, kneaded by trampling battalions of misfortune.

How long has it been now since I passed through the River Gate and rolled by the railroad siding to stop in front of the Rock at that precise hour when the gangs were coming in for their supper? And the band was sitting in a pavilion in the Visitor's Park, playing a rousing military march. And voices echoed among the cells and the corridors, hands gripping the bars and the windows, faces peering down at the huddle of men in civilian clothes with dead-white faces getting the handcuffs removed from their wrists.

"Newcocks! Newcocks!"

"Fresh meat over here!"

"You'll be sorr—eeeeeee!"

So all of us knew just how Lloyd Jackson felt and what he had to do during those weeks of initiation. He was tested

and interviewed, photographed, fingerprinted and examined, classified, inoculated and numbered. Every morning he marched out the gate with the Eight Spot to work with a grubbing hoe in the surrounding bean fields. On Saturday night he saw the movie in the auditorium. On Sunday he saw the baseball game.

Early one morning his name was called out by the Captain of the Rock. The Turnkey let him out of the Bull Pen on G-Floor and he and two other men were escorted by a Runner to the office of the Captain of the Guard. There they played around with papers, took away all the extra prison clothing they had and loaded them up into the Hard Road Bus.

Again Lloyd Jackson was taken away, the driver stopping at the River Gate and picking up his pistol from the guard room. Then they went on, bouncing over the dips and bumps of the narrow asphalt road that goes for eleven miles to the town of Starke, and then down Route 441 through the very center of the state, passing Gainesville and then Ocala. When one of the men told the driver he had to urinate, the delivery truck was pulled over and parked on the side of the road. There was a two inch hole in the floor and they put a funnel into the hole, taking turns getting down on their knees.

Eventually the Bus left the main highway, following a narrow State road until coming to the clay road that goes through the orange groves. At the turn-off there was a small, neatly lettered white sign — *S. R. D. Camp #93*.

The Bus stopped on the asphalt apron. The driver got out and stretched, walking stiffly towards one of the white-painted frame buildings. The convicts inside whispered to each other, their feet shifting awkwardly, peering out through the grated windows at the lawns, the fences, the sidewalk.

There was a long wait. Then the driver returned with a

fat man wearing a Panama hat, a short sleeved sport shirt and pastel blue slacks. The fat man made continuous spitting movements with his lips as though trying to spit out an invisible grain of tobacco. In the background stood a man with deeply tanned skin and vacant eyes, on the alert and tense. In his hand dangled a pump action shotgun.

The driver looked at the guard who nodded his head. Unlocking the door, the driver stood aside and the men climbed out, awkward and stiff and blinking. At a command they lined up, trying not to look the fat man in the eye. They waited, clutching the paper bags and cigar boxes which contained their worldly goods. The Captain spat three times, producing nothing but tiny jets of air. Without looking at any of them, he read their names off a list, the men answering, careful to say 'sir'.

Then the Yard Man came up, his shoulders hunched and thin, his lined and wrinkled face tight and cruel over the protruding bones of his skull. He wiggled his jaw and shifted his false teeth back and forth, staring with cold eves at the Newcocks.

I can still remember how it felt to sit there in the empty Building, looking around and waiting for something to happen. Everyone does the same thing. He sits and smokes and stares here and there, walking up and down the Building a few times between the rows of empty bunks. Without really meaning to, he counts them. Fifty-one. But he feels like a trespasser, like Goldilocks, knowing that some other man sleeps in every one of those bunks. Another man who gets tired and hungry and who worries. Another man who has committed a felony and who is building Time.

The Building is built of wood. The windows are only square holes without any glass, covered over with chain link fence material and also with fly screen. Outside there are heavy shutters propped up by sticks. The room itself is a large rectangle with an alcove on one side which has a

floor of concrete and in which is located the big iron coal stove, a urinal, four toilets and the shower. The shower is in the corner, a large area partitioned off by a low curb of concrete. There is a small, cracked mirror and one faucet. There are also two wooden tables with benches, the kind they have in the parks for picnics. Directly opposite this alcove is the Wicker, the basket-turret where an armed guard sits up all night keeping watch over all the little things we do. There is no privacy whatever in the Building. Just as there are no wash basins nor cups. You drink, wash, shave and brush your teeth beneath the one faucet in the shower stall.

The Newcocks sat on the benches of the two tables. They waited. Trustees came in from the kitchen from time to time. They took showers or went to the john. But actually they came in to size up the Newcocks and to get the latest news from the Rock.

Later the Yard Man came inside the Wicker and shoved a wad of clothes through a small slot in the screen down at the bottom next to the floor. The clothes were numbered with India ink. The pants were of the standard Raiford variety but the shirts and the jackets were of much heavier material. They were also given striped bill caps and heavy work shoes, the heels rimmed with steel. After sorting out the clothes according to the laundry numbers assigned them, they changed and shoved the things they wore back through the slot. They were each issued a big, battered tablespoon and told to keep it with them always. If they should lose it the Yard Man would issue another one. But first you must spend the night in the Box.

Later the guard was relieved by the Wicker Man whose regular job is to sit up all night with his shotgun and pistol, standing guard over the sleeping Building. He is round and immensely fat, his small eyes peering at the Newcocks over rimless glasses. He has short, tottering legs and a hard, tight mouth that has never smiled, squeezed in between his

flabby jowls.

Outside, the Newcocks saw a black and yellow truck driving up with a thick crowd of convicts in the back. The guards dismounted, spreading out to the sides. At a signal the men scrambled down and lined up along the sidewalk, heads bared to the Captain who was in his rocking chair, one foot propped up against a column of the porch, turning his head to spit with a dry puff of air.

Meanwhile the Wicker Man had come inside the Building with a sawed-off piece of broom handle. Beginning a hard, repetitious tapping on the floor, he banged the stick on each and every board to sound it for possible saw cuts. He tottered about on his clumsy legs, banging on the walls, the shutters, scraping the stick across the window mesh.

Through this noise came the shouts of the convicts as they streamed through the gate outside, counting off with booming voices that drifted over the camp like gunshots. The Newcocks sat to one side, motionless, embarrassed, smoking with the calmness one learns how to assume. One by one the gangs counted through the gate, running eagerly across the yard to open wooden lockers built against the wall of the Building outside. Some went to the Messhall door to line up. Others came running inside the Building with scraping shoes, with yells, curses and songs, shoving for standing room around the toilets, Dragline growling out like an enraged bear, “Git out’n the way, Onion Haid.”

“Damn Drag. Ah gotta piss don’t ah?”

“You gotta piss? Ah’ll piss right in your Gawd damn pocket in about a minute.”

And then I saw him. There was Lloyd Jackson, sitting on the bench with his legs crossed, his elbow on top of the table, a butt in his fingers. His eyes were half-closed, watching the men as they came storming in. There was a slight smile on his lips. And it was in that smile that I recognized him, remembering that far away expression that

I had seen in the photograph in the paper.

The Wicker Man chased everybody outside and we all lined up in front of the Messhall waiting for the Walking Boss on duty to give us the signal to start going in.

Inside the Messhall there was a stack of aluminum plates by the door and everyone filed by a low table in the center where the trustees ladled out the string beans and rice. And at the other end there was a pan full of crude chunks of fried ham. The Newcocks were amazed. Other than the greasy, slimy fat back served about once a week, there is no meat at all up in Raiford. None. Unless you can afford to buy your own hamburgers at the Canteen. And you have to be a trustee to get to the Canteen.

After supper the rest of us checked into the Building. But the Newcocks waited outside on the porch until we had been frisked and counted and allowed to pass inside. Then Carr counted them in, tolerantly patient if they hadn't quite learned what they were expected to do.

The last one came through the Chute. Carr entered, the Wicker Man locking the outside door behind him. Then Carr swung the heavy wooden gate shut, the long iron tongue sticking through the slot into the Wicker where the Free Man locked it with a heavy padlock. Again, we were tucked in for the night.

The Newcocks huddled together at the poker table, waiting for someone to tell them what to do. But they were ignored by the Family as we went on with our usual routines.

Since the hot water supply only lasts for fifteen minutes everyone takes a bath at the same time. At least twenty men were in the shower, wading back and forth through a pool of mud and lathered soapsuds, jostling for position under one of the five shower heads in a shuffling mass of arms and legs and bare asses, the men all two-toned, with upper bodies burned black by the sun and white as snow

from the waist down.

But there is a system. And I could tell that Jackson was sitting over there observing the system.

After the showers everyone smoked and talked. But the voices were kept low, scarcely above a murmur. The Newcocks responded to this restrained atmosphere with caution. The first two whispered to themselves but Jackson said nothing at all. The radios were playing but with the volume so low that several heads were pressed close to the loudspeaker. The toilets were all occupied and other men lounged nearby, waiting for a chance to go. The smell was terrible but we were accustomed to it, the men in the showers and those writing letters at the table paying no attention.

Carr, the Floorwalker, was pacing up and down the room, rolling with his bearlike swagger, his 230-pound body rocking from side to side, his arms and shoulders swinging. But his feet were noiseless, wearing crepe soled shoes. Angrily he scowled, glaring at no one and at nothing, moving his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, plowing right through the middle of a huddle of convicts and scattering them like October leaves.

“Aw right. Let’s have a little quiet in here. Otherwise a couple of you guys will spend the rest of the night out in the Gator.”

I saw Jackson give a hard look at Carr, probably incensed at the idea of a convict giving orders to other convicts. Yet he gave no sign. Only his eyes moved, following Carr a few minutes and then looking at the other men.

After everyone was out of the shower and things had settled down a little bit, Carr called the Newcocks together for a talk. But we just went on with our affairs, making wallets, reading, listening to a radio, sitting in for a few hands at the poker table.

Carr was growling, so low he was almost inaudible. He

spoke out of the corner of his mouth, his voice deliberately deep and grating, his lips pursed together, his eyes flitting around the Building so as not to miss a trick of what was going on.

Carr laid down the law:

"There will be no Loudtalking in the Building. There will be no playing Grab Ass. The First Bell is at five minutes to eight and everyone will get on his bunk for a count. Right away. The Last Bell is at eight o'clock. After that there will be no talking at all. The lights are never turned out in the Building. So you can read if you want to after the Last Bell. But there will be no smoking in bed. If you want to smoke you will sit up with both legs over the edge of the bunk. Anyone caught smoking while lying down will spend a night in the Box."

"In Raiford you only get one sheet. Here you get two. Every week you switch the top sheet to the bottom and turn the bottom sheet in to the Laundry Boy. Then you put the clean sheet on top. Anybody who turns in the wrong sheet will spend a night in the Box."

"The Building will not look like a Greek whorehouse. Everyone's ass will be covered with shorts or with a towel. No one will sit on his bunk with dirty pants on. Anyone caught sitting on his bunk with his pants on will spend a night in the Box."

"Those who drop a butt on the floor or even a match, spend a night in the Box. If you buy a coke at the Juke and do not bring back the bottle — if you do any Loudtalking — if you check out in the morning without taking *all* your personal junk with you — you spend a night in the Box."

"If there are any questions, you see Carr."

These Newcocks had arrived just before the men they were to replace had gone home. Therefore the Family was temporarily overpopulated and the Yard Man had had three extra bunks and mattresses brought in by the trustees.

Under Carr's supervision the new men rigged up the bunks above the top tiers of other bunks in order to form triple-deckers. They tossed up the mattresses, pillows and bedding and climbed up the precarious structure to make up their beds for the night.

And then one of them took off his shirt, revealing a large eagle tattooed in red and blue ink across the expanse of his chest. Stupid Blondie and Stupidest Blondie both crowded around, eagerly admiring the art work as the Newcock grinned. But as the new man took off his shirt he had also taken off his name. Whatever name he had used before he arrived was totally forgotten and from then on he was known to one and all as Eagle.

Feeling a little more confident, Eagle and the other Newcock went to the Juke to buy candy bars and cokes. Jabo the Cook has the concession to the camp store which is a large wooden box filled with all sorts of Free World goodies plus a bucket of ice and a few cases of cold drinks shoved under his bunk.

But as I glanced up over the book I was reading I could see Jackson sitting on the edge of his bunk, his head bent forward to duck under the ceiling. He had a towel wrapped around his middle and his legs were crossed. Calmly he was rolling a smoke with State tobacco, at the same time looking over what was going on in the Building.

Squinting his eyes and cocking his head he studied the poker game in progress which is the personal concession of the Floorwalker who cuts each pot ten percent. Carr pays the dealer a certain percentage and there is no doubt in our minds that he must also pay off the Captain. Every night, for at least an hour after the Last Bell, the poker game continues, the bets made in whispers, the coins clinking quietly on top of a folded blanket, the cards rustling as they are shuffled, riffled, cut and put together.

In other corners men were talking together in low

murmurs, others writing letters home or to the lawyer or to the Parole Board, explaining how they had been completely rehabilitated and were now anxious to begin a new life. Others were reading. Some men were already asleep. Babalugats was still clowning around, imitating Donald Duck. Some were busily lacing up the edges of a new wallet, holding the needle in their teeth as they quickly pulled the five yards of leather lace through one of the punched holes. The chain stitch takes an average of forty-five minutes and the standard rate of pay is ten cents per wallet.

I kept watching Jackson. There was something in the way he held his head and the way he held his cigarette. And I knew that he would always stay under the gun as long as he was here. He was intelligent and he was unafraid. This meant that the Free Men would be down on him from the very beginning. Not only that. There was that smile.

The Wicker Man got out of his chair, scraping his feet as he opened the door and went outside to the porch. He took an iron rod and hit the brake drum that dangles by a piece of wire from the rafters overhead. As the gong reverberated Carr swaggered back and forth between the bunks, calling out with his low and ominous growl — “First Bell. First Bell. Let’s git to bed.”

Everyone scurried about the room with his last minute preparations for the night. Books and magazines were borrowed, pants removed, toilets visited. In a few minutes there was quiet, everyone on his bunk, either lying down or smoking with his legs swung over the edge. But the poker game continued without interruption. Here and there bedsprings were squeaking. Shoes clumped on the floor. Chains rattled. Then silence. Again the Wicker Man went outside and hit the brake drum.

“Last Bell. Last Bell.”

Carr slowly walked up one side of the Building and back

on the other, carefully counting. Then he went over to the Wicker.

"Fifty-three, Boss. And one in the Box."

"Fifty-three. OK. Carr."

Bunks and springs squeaked as someone rolled over. The dealer riffled the deck of cards. The silence was broken by a low unintelligible growl. Carr answered the growl with another that matched the intonation and pitch of the first.

"Gittin' up."

"Yeaaaahhhh."

A Chain Man rose from his bunk, catching up his shackles with his string and hook, wrapping a towel around his waist and moving towards the toilets with quick, short, hip-swinging steps. The shackle rattled just once as he sat himself on the throne. In a moment there were other growls.

"Eeeyaaa!"

"Aaaah!"

"GIDDYAP"

"YEEAP"

"Gettin' up, Carr."

"No. Full house."

I turned over, moving my head so that the bunk above cast a shadow over my eyes from the light bulb on the ceiling. Then I glanced over to my right and saw Jackson still sitting where he was, legs crossed, one arm across his chest with his hand supporting the opposite elbow, his thumb and first finger holding his cigarette while the other fingers were loosely curled in a masculine gesture of the debonair.

For a moment I tried to think back to what it was like to spend my own first night here. I remembered that the bulb was a torture to my eyes. I was conscious of the whispered

giggles from the poker table, the sounds of the Wicker Man puttering in his cage, the growls for permission to get up. And there were the smells — the hot, stale air, the smell of burning coal, dirty clothes, sweat, shoes, the odor of shit. And then someone would roll over and the whole precarious apparatus of bunks would sway and creak in response.

Someone let go with a long, delayed, incredibly loud bean fart.

Carr answered, “Yeeeaaahhhh!”

Carr laughed, which for him is to silently snort blasts of air through his nose. The culprit sat up in bed to grin with impish victory at the assembled world. But the Wicker Man spoke up, using his Free Man’s prerogative to speak in a normal voice, which sounded like a yell in the muteness of the Building:

“That feller’s gonna need a dose of salts, ain’t he?”

“It’s just them beans, Boss,” answered Carr, placatingly.

Then I slept, shielding my eyes with my pillow. Once I woke up and saw Carr playing solitaire at the table, the poker game broken up, the gamblers sent to bed. Again I slept until next I heard the cooks and trustees being awakened. They dressed. First the gate and then the door were unlocked, opened, closed and locked again. An hour later the Chain Men were getting their early call so they would have time to put on their pants.

Trying to muffle the noise, they sat on the floor busily working at the involved procedure. At night they always take off their pants in such a way that one leg is turned inside out and pulled over the other. In the morning the whole thing is gradually worked beneath the ankle ring and pulled over the right leg. Then the outer pant leg is pulled down, leaving the other one in place. The left leg is reversed and pulled down over the right foot and then over the chain and then back up the left leg. After they rigged

up their harness and strings they went over to the faucet to wash their faces and brush their teeth.

I lay there for ten minutes, drowsy, reluctant to wake up. Yet I couldn't help but be aware of the tinkle of shackles, the scrape and thud of shoes, the splatter of the water from the faucet. Then the Wicker Man got up and opened the door. I waited. Then he hit the brake drum with the iron bar. Swiftly Carr walked up and down the Building, making sure there were no sleepy heads.

"First Bell. Sheets and rolls. First Bell. Let's go."

The bare heels of the Family hit the floor all at once. It was pandemonium. Beds squeaked and swayed, shoes clumped, toilets flushed and gurgled, the faucet trickled as a crowd of men took their turns. All the beds were made up and personal belongings gathered together to be taken outside and stowed in the lockers. Shoe laces were tied and pockets stowed with the necessities of the day. And then the Family was gathered in a silent crowd in front of the gate, smoking and waiting, Carr blocking the exit with his body, facing the crowd with a belligerent scowl which everyone sleepily ignored.

Outside, the guards had taken their places on the gun platforms. The Wicker Man unlocked the gate, went out on the porch and unlocked the outer door. There was a pause. And then exactly five minutes after the First Bell had rung, there was the sound of the Second Bell. Carr swung the gate and door open and stepped aside as the men poured out in a rushing tumult of clumping feet and rattling chains, their voices counting off loud and clear as they went out, each one with a different tone and pitch, each one with a different soul — "One TWO Three "Four" FIVE Six! seven?

Like little children the Newcocks imitated our every move. We tolerated their ignorance with proper dignity, correcting their mistakes and giving advice with gestures

and quiet hisses.

It was pitch black outside and cold. Everyone scampered to his locker to put things away. But since there aren't nearly enough lockers to go around the Newcocks had to find someone willing to share his space. Then there was the line in front of the Messhall door. Cigarettes glowed among the shifting silhouettes, phantoms which giggled, cursed and groaned. The line shuffled forward, the voices stilled and the butts put out as another form entered the glowing rectangle of the door, the silhouette of each man suddenly illuminated to those of us still out in the yard.

Inside there was waiting a cup of hot, black water, thin grits, a slab of fat back, catheads and one greasy, cold egg. But the faces of the Newcocks reflected their surprise. In Raiford you are served a tiny portion of powdered eggs once a week. And there is a sign on the Messhall wall that has been there for as long as anyone can remember, *No Eggs Today*.

We ate in a hurry, going outside to wash our spoons under the faucet in the yard and putting them away in our pockets. Quickly we lighted up smokes again, inhaling deeply. We stood in groups and huddles. In a few minutes we began to form a double line that was arranged according to the four squads. Again the Newcocks were advised, hissed, gestured and recruited into one or the other of the two Bull Gangs. Eagle was drafted into the big Bull Gang by Stupid Blondie who had fallen madly in love with the tattoo on his chest. The other Newcock went with the little Bull Gang, the one which has Boss Palmer for a Walking Boss and is more or less composed of fuck-ups and hoosiers. But Jackson lingered on the porch, smoking and waiting with the other men. At the last minute he strolled over and got at the end of the big Bull Gang, calmly, as though confident he had made the right choice.

The Yard Man came through the gate, closing it behind him and standing there for a minute with his shoulders

hunched under his old leather jacket, his false teeth working back and forth, clicking audibly within the death's head of his face. Then he walked up to the back of the line and snarled out, "Aw right, gawd damn it. Straighten out them lines."

There was silence. The lines straightened. Hats were bared but cigarettes remained in place. Then the Yard Man walked forward, counting silently.

At the gate he spoke through the fence."Forty-three Cap'n. One in the Box."

"Forty-three. All right, Boss. Let 'em out."

The Captain stood motionless with his hands in his pockets. His windbreaker sports jacket was zippered up to his throat, the collar up around the back of his neck. The brim of his Panama hat was pulled over his eyes. He stood there and spat three or four times.

The Yard Man opened the gate and stepped to one side. The left hand column began to file through, each man turning his head to count over his shoulder as clearly as he could so the man behind him wouldn't misunderstand.

"— seventeen Eighteen! NINETEEN (twenty) —"

But the Newcock in Boss Palmer's squad began to stutter.

"— twenty — uh — twenty — TWENTY —"

Swiftly the Yard Man kicked him square in the butt, grabbing him by the sleeve and pulling him back to the gate.

"Git back here, damn yore sorry ass! You ain't allowed to be no lazy, raggety ass tramp no more. You hear? You gotta straighten up. But quick. Now git back here and give the right count."

"— uh — uh —"

"Twenty-*one!*

"*TWENTY-ONE!*

The interrupted column resumed its counting. Then the right hand column started through the gate, drawing abreast of the left which was standing in place. Everyone stood still a few minutes, heads bared, cigarettes glowing. Yet everybody had exactly the same thought. Tramp. The new man's name would have to be Tramp.

The spotlights fixed on the poles surrounding the asphalt apron were glaring down at the parked squad trucks and glaring into our sleepy eyes. The guards were spaced all around us, trying to look alert for the Captain's benefit. From the kennels way behind the Building and behind the woodpile we could hear the bloodhounds barking for their breakfast. The yapping of Rudolph the puppy was unmistakable. And so was the deep baritone of Big Blue.

The Walking Bosses stood together about one step behind the Captain. Boss Peters held the nub of his missing arm with his hand. Boss Higgins squinted his eyes and scowled, his hand gripping his stomach which we knew was riddled with ulcers. Boss Palmer stared at us over his bifocals, grinned at nothing, leaning forward to spit and then shifting his quid as he pulled out his watch, replaced it, patted his pot belly and then hooked a thumb in his suspenders. Boss Godfrey stood relaxed, leaning heavily on his cane, taking the cigar out of his mouth with his other hand to roll it back and forth with the tips of his fingers.

Everybody waited. The Captain turned his head and spat.

"All right, Boss Higgins. Take 'em away."

The Walking Boss of the big Patch Squad signaled and the men stepped forward, the left hand column counting off by twos. Then the other Patch Squad counted off. Then Boss Palmer's Bull Gang. And then Boss Godfrey straightened up, replaced the cigar in his mouth and sauntered over to the rear of the cage truck, holding the edge of the gate with one hand. He gestured just once, a slight shift of his cane and then we started forward, two by

two, mounting the steps and ducking inside as fast as we possibly could.

Bouncing and swerving over the ruts, we roared off into the darkness. We crossed our legs and shifted our feet, rolled up cigarettes and smoked. Rabbit climbed underneath the bench to lay on the floor on his back, pulled his cap over his face and fell asleep. Dynamite got down on his knees, peering through the bars and trying to estimate where the job would be for the day.

But most of us were glum and silent, staring through the bars at the sleeping Free World outside. Occasionally a match was struck, illuminating a sad, serious face in the gloom.

Finally the truck pulled over on the shoulder and stopped. The gate was unlocked. We got out. Jim the Trustee handed down our tools and we started to work. Boss Godfrey walked up the road a bit, turned around and leaned on his cane. He stood there, watching us, silhouetted against the dawn, the sun rising up behind his body, right up through his head and out of the black night he wore for a hat. All day the sun rose high up into the sky while we, stripped to the waist, were seared by its burning rays. But we knew that sun was really the left eye of the Walking Boss just as his right eye is the moon.

8

ON JACKSON'S FIRST DAY ON THE ROAD WE were shoveling dirt up from the bottom of the ditch to fill in the washouts that the rains had worn along the edge of the pavement. When the slope of the embankment was too high to reach we would carry a shovelful of dirt up the slope and than walk back down to the bottom of the ditch for another shovelful. The Chain Men in the gang always stay on top, their shackles making it too difficult for them to clamber up and down. They brush down the piles and clumps of earth, using the edges of their shovels which they sweep as though they were brooms.

Back and forth and up and down we moved with the same monotonous regularity as pismire ants carrying their grains of sand. And this is exactly why this job is always referred to as piss anting.

But unless the terrain is especially hilly we are always able to reach the pavement by pitching the dirt. Each man took a sector of about ten feet. He threw up enough dirt to do the job and then would fill in the holes, that is, he would bevel in the edges of the holes he had dug in the ditch bottom. Then he would move up to the head of the line, leapfrogging the men in front of him.

All morning long the shovels of the Bull Gang were making shiny arcs with graceful and rhythmic swings of muscled arms and twists of bodies. Clumps of dirt sailed through the air in lazy parabolas. The Chain Man held his shovel blade behind the washout, using it for a backstop. I kicked my shovel into the ground, bent back the handle over my knee and with that timing all of us have developed, the clod of dirt flew off like a projectile to splat

against the Chain Man's shovel. He held it there and in quick succession I threw up three more. He began to brush it all smooth and I filled in my holes, yelled out to the guards and moved on up to the head of the line.

But Jackson and Eagle were shoveling like mad and getting nowhere. Not having the right balance and leverage, they were only able to throw the dirt a few feet. They tried harder. Their chests panting, their pitches became wilder and more frantic. Patiently we demonstrated the proper technique and when the new men couldn't keep up we would stay back and help them with their sector. And from time to time the new men would have to resort to piss anting the dirt up the slope while we merely tossed it up, shoveling away at perfect ease.

The sun got higher and hotter. Everyone took off his jacket and shirt and left it on the edge of the road for Rabbit. But when the pasty white skins of the Newcocks were exposed to the sun they began to get a blistering burn. The sweat got in their eyes. They had headaches and their vision blurred. They felt like they were going to vomit, beginning to stagger with wobbling knees. By the time Smoking Period came around both of them were nearly bear caught.

But somehow everyone always makes the day. And at last it was over. Boss Godfrey pulled out his watch and growled a word and everyone surged towards the tool truck, handing up their shovels to Jim and Rabbit and then clambering into the cage truck. The Walking Boss locked the gate and we headed back to Camp.

The truck was in an uproar. As far as the rest of us were concerned it had been an easy day. We laughed and joked, lit up smokes and wondered what there would be for supper. We sorted out our jackets and shirts and put them on, some of us dropping to our knees to lean on the bench and look out through the bars of angle iron to eyeball at the passing scenery. The Newcocks just sat there, slumped

in an exhausted heap, their hands blistered, their backs burned, their muscles cramped and stiff.

But the rest of us were tense and excited as we rolled through the teeming Negro section of town, eyeballing like mad at the black girls strolling by on the sidewalk or sitting on the front porches. Half under our breaths we gasped out our frenzied comments and appraisals, gripping each other by the arm or poking with our elbows to bring attention to a sassy hip or a huge breast bulging out of a thin cotton dress. Hoarsely we swore with outraged frustration whenever there was a smile or a winked response to the row of dirty white faces peering wild eyed from the depths of our rolling cage.

Back at Camp we unloaded, were lined up and shaken down and then counted in through the gate. After supper we all jammed in together in the shower. The Newcocks were a bit reluctant to enter into the community bath but Jackson calmly strolled right into the middle of it all, soap in hand.

And then we saw his scars. He had several jagged shrapnel wounds on both legs. There was a long grooved mark that went down his left side, skipped a few inches at his waist and then continued down the side of his buttock. We admired his wounds but said nothing. He was still a Newcock.

For the rest of that week we piss anted the Clay Pit Road. Every night the Newcocks took a shower and stumbled to bed, their backs and legs and arms and hands stiff, blistered and sunburned.

And then Saturday. All day a guard sat on each gun platform at the corners of the fence and we had the run of the yard. The Building reverberated with whoops and yells. We let off steam. We blew our tops. Dirty clothes were flung over the fence beside the kitchen and clean ones taken off the pegged board where they had been hung by

the Laundry Boy.

Everyone shaved, combed his hair, strolled about barefooted to give his feet a chance to breathe, glorious in our fresh, clean, wrinkled clothes. The wallet industry boomed; floats and backs, side pockets and liners cut out of sheepskins and calf skins, glued with rubber cement, punched and laced and then shipped out to the Free World.

But there was still extra energy to spare. Wrestling matches were staged periodically, the two combatants rolling over the floors and banging against the frames of the bunks, each one trying to take the pants off the other one, the victor galloping up and down the Building waving the trophy in the air as the shamefaced and bare-assed loser pursued him.

Outside on the lawn there might be boxing. Inside there was certainly a crap game in the shower stall and a poker game at the table. Radios blared out at full volume. In the middle of the floor two Chain Men would be jitterbugging, barefooted and bare-chested, their feet leaping and turning this way and that as their shackles jingled frantically over the floor boards, tinkling with a frenzied joy. And as the Chain Men did their dance, others stood around and clapped their hands in rhythm to the mad, jazzy sounds.

Koko is the camp barber. On weekends he takes the trash can and lays a board over it for a seat. He puts a towel around your neck and goes to work with a pair of old, worn-out clippers and a pair of dull scissors. If you have a quarter you give it to him. Otherwise you owe it to him. If you are one of those who never gets a money order from home then he does it free.

Sunday dinner is a luxury. We have beef stew and canned peaches. But at supper we revert right back to beans and corn bread.

The following week the new men dragged their way through the days, panting and stumbling along the ditch

bottom as we dug and carried and pitched, filled in the holes, moved up and then dug and carried and pitched. The skins of the Newcocks reddened and peeled, blistered and bled. The blisters on their hands broke open and stung in the brine of their own sweat.

But the Newcocks dug and died alone. For we hadn't yet decided. We were still watching their gestures and listening to their voices, studying the way they held their heads and looked us in the eye. We taught them all the complicated laws and rules of this Fatherland of ours. But we still had our own work partners, our own circles during Smoking Period and Bean Time.

Every day at noon Rabbit comes around and takes up a Store Order from the guards and those convicts who have the money. Boss Godfrey and Rabbit drive off in one of the trucks and return in twenty minutes or so with the Pepsi Colas, the milk and crackers, the Free World cigarettes and candy bars. And also the girlie magazines and the paper-backed Fuck Books with their wondrous tales of seduction, perversion, rapes and romance that we will read after the Last Bell, our greedy eyes scanning over the wonders of the written dream.

But on Tuesday the new men were given a demonstration of the marksmanship of Boss Godfrey. He has a sharpshooter's rifle which is his own personal weapon and which he keeps in the cab of the cage truck. But to prevent any possibility of armed escape, he keeps the clip of cartridges and the bolt in his pocket.

The time for taking the Store Order came. Boss Godfrey and Rabbit drove off. In about a half hour we could see the truck rattling and bouncing up the road at better than forty miles an hour. High over the open fields to our right a white crane was flying in the opposite direction. Suddenly we saw the rifle poke out the window of the cab. Without aiming, simply pointing the barrel in the precise direction of his will, Boss Godfrey fired.

The crane jerked in mid-air, a handful of feathers exploding into the wind. Without even fluttering it plummeted down into a patch of palmettos, falling with a smooth, limp trajectory of white, as though Death himself had spoken.

We stood there, our shovels forgotten in our hands. And then Jackson opened up for the first time. With a soft mutter only heard by those of us who were near him, he exclaimed with mock astonishment, “Uhhh hmmm! That man Luke can sure shoot!”

With a little smile, he stabbed his shovel in the ground, kicked it, bent the handle over his knee and tossed a clod of dirt. Ears was still standing up on the shoulder of the road, his mouth agape, holding his shovel behind a washout. He jerked awake when the clump of dirt landed square and solid against his shovel blade with a whack.

So the days went on. We built our Time. Jackson and the others began to harden. Their skin was turning dark and their hands were getting calloused. Their muscles began to swell. The Newcocks began to lose the awe of their surroundings and were more at home, accustomed to the routines.

Gradually Jackson began to change. Slowly he revealed a sardonic sense of humor that seemed to include everything. He could laugh at the movements of the ants on the ground, at the sun, at the traffic on the road. And whenever the Bull Gang would be standing by waiting for orders Jackson would pull his cap down over his eyes, lean on his shovel and drawl under his breath.

“Well now. Come on. Shoot, Luke. Let’s go here.”

Jackson began to sit in on the poker games in the evening, staying on after the Last Bell until Carr broke up the game. And it turned out that he was an excellent gambler. You never had the slightest idea of what he was going to do next. He would sit there and ante up for half an

hour without playing out a hand and then suddenly he would call a bet purely on his nerve. He might raise you on sheer bluff. Or he might be holding a dead lock. But whatever it was that he was holding in his hand he would still look you right in the eye and smile.

One night everyone had thrown in his hand but he and Dragline. Drag had opened up the betting and then stood pat. Jackson drew three cards. Smirking, Drag bet the limit, a dollar. Jackson looked at his cards, looked at Dragline, saw the bet and then raised it a dollar. Drag sat there scowling, swearing in a harsh whisper and tapping the edge of his hand on the table. Jackson looked at him and smiled. Finally he drawled in that soft way of his.

"Well, come on now, Luke. Shoot or give up the gun."

"Ah am shootin' — Ah mean — ah'm thinkin'. Damn yore ass. Ah think you're bluffin'. Ah calls yore bet."

Dragline had a queen-high straight.

Jackson had four threes.

The next day out on the road Jackson was joined by Dragline and Koko during Smoking Period. Koko wanted to know about Jackson's war experiences, about his wounds and his medals, about all the girls he had laid in North Africa, in Italy and France and Germany.

Dragline lay on the ground saying nothing. He himself had been a truck driver during the war, shuttling supplies from the ports along the Persian Gulf over the mountains into Russia. And he was still sulking from his poker defeat of the night before. But Koko persisted, eager and anxious.

"Come on Jackson. How about this big medal that you got? That Silver Star thing. What did you do to get that?"

"Shoot man, nothin'. Nothin' at all. All them people were just runnin' around like crazy. Shootin' guns and throwin' things. Screamin' and hollerin'. Everything blowin' up and burnin'. All them trucks and tanks and airplanes runnin'

races day and night. Me, I just played it cool, that's all."

After Smoking Period Jackson began to work along with Dragline and Koko. They shoveled and shot the bull in whispers until Boss Godfrey drove off with Rabbit to fetch the Store Order. As soon as the Man was gone Dragline stopped to take out his chewing tobacco, calling out, "Gettin' a chew here, Boss Paul."

"Yeah. Chew it up, Drag."

Dragline took a pinch of the coarse, loose grains from the crumpled package, stuffing them in his mouth and chewing it up and moving it over in a wad to one side of his cheek. He offered the package to Koko who took a chew and then spoke out loud.

"Must be time for Boss Godfrey to get back. Must be time for beans. What time do you say it is, Dragline?"

Drag stopped. He spit out a stream of tobacco juice to one side, shifted his quid with his tongue, turned his head and winked at Boss Paul who stood nearby.

"Ah bet ah kin come closer to it than you kin."

"I'll bet you a cold drink you can't."

"A cold drink? A cold drink? You think ah'm gonna waste mah soopernatcheral talents on a lousy five-cent cold drink? What do you think ah am?"

"How much do you wanna bet then?"

"Nothin' less'n a quarter. At least."

"A quarter? What do you think *I* am? A millionaire?"

"Eff'n you don't wanna bet it's all right by me."

"OK. Make it a quarter then."

"How 'bout you there, Mister Newcock Poker Player Jackson? You wanna bet too?"

"Yeah. All right. I'll bet you a quarter. Why not?"

"Ha! This is mah lucky day. Ah'm cleanin' up!"

“Well Drag, said Koko. What time do you say it is?”

“Oh no you don’t. Yo’ll gotta say first. Ah kin come within two minutes ever’ time and you know it. Yo’ll jes guess a minute from me and you might jes win by accident.”

“No bet then. We got to have some kind of a handicap. We ain’t got no watch built into our ass like you got.”

“Ha! You know it too, huh? Well, let’s see. Ah guess ah kin afford to be generous with a pair of no ‘count amachoor time tellers like you two. Yeah. OK. Ah’ll guess first.”

“All right then, said Koko. It’s a bet.”

“Yeah,” said Jackson. “Fire when ready, Mister Dragline.”

Dragline looked up at the sun and squinted. He took off his cap and wiped his face with it, shoving it back on his head at an absurd angle. He stabbed his shovel into the ground and walked around it slowly, putting his fist on top of the handle with his thumb upraised as he scowled down at its shadow on the ground. Then he measured off the distance from the blade of the shovel to the end of the handle’s shadow, using his outstretched fingers for a ruler.

Spatoo! went the tobacco juice. Drag’s lips began to move as he ticked off calculations on his fingers.

The rest of us were grinning. Boss Paul and the other guards were entranced by this devious, complex ritual which was really designed to steal a few minutes of free fucking off. And we knew that no one but Dragline could ever hope to get away with it all. Which is why we kept on shoveling, slowly, ineffectively, but constantly moving nevertheless.

Jackson stood there, leaning on his shovel and smiling.

“Well now, come on here Luke. You know damn well we got a couple of rules around here. You gotta shoot. Shoot, man. Either that or give up the gun to my sergeant here.”

Spatoo! went the tobacco juice. Dragline frowned,

scratched his nose and scowled. Closing one eye, he turned his head and gazed at Koko.

“It’s exactly ten forty-seven. AM.”

“Eastern Daylight Saving Time?”

“Natcherly. This here’s official.”

“Drag. You’re nuts. We had Smoking Period at ten. We went back to work at ten fifteen. Twenty minutes later Rabbit took up the Store Order. Him and Boss Godfrey took off at least a half hour ago. At least. It must be a quarter after eleven. If not later.”

“OK. Aw right. That’s fine. Do you wanna say it’s eleven fifteen?”

“Now wait. If you say ten forty-seven — then I’ll say it’s — uh — eleven even.”

“How ‘bout you, Mister Handful o’ Threes? What do you say?”

“Well sir. Reckon I’ll go along with my big-headed friend here, Mister Coconut. I’ll say eleven five.”

“Ha! You lose! You both lose!”

Dragline glanced up and down the road and then called over to Boss Paul who stood there grinning, his shotgun balanced horizontally over his shoulder.

Dragline giggled. “Hey Boss! Boss Paul! Listen! Ah got me a pair of mullets what think they can beat me out on the time. This Koko brain here. And this Newcock. This here parkin’ meter bandit thing that calls itself Luke.”

Boss Paul stood there without moving.

“Aw, come on Boss Paul. Ain’t nobody lookin’.”

Slowly Boss Paul stretched his free arm, yawned, pulled out his watch pocket, replaced it and grinned. We all waited. And then he murmured confidentially. “It’s ten forty-eight, Dragline.”

“Ah tole yuh, Koko! Ah tole yuh! Didn’t ah? And you too

there, Mister Luke. Ah got me a real cool eyeball. Ah knows jes what that sun up there is doin', *all* the time."

"All right. All right. So I owe you a quarter."

"Owe? *Owe?* Owe, nothin'. Cough it up. Right now. One cuter. You too, there, Mister Luke. Boss Paul! Boss Brown! Collectin' mah debts over here."

"Yeah."

"All right."

"Collect it there, Drag."

Gleefully Dragline collected the coins that Koko and Jackson put in his hand. And then it was all over. Down the road we could see the cage truck coming and we all dummied up and went back to work.

At noon time, Dragline, Koko and Jackson ate their beans under the shade of a live oak tree. And from then on they always worked together. For the Newcock had been fully accepted by the Bull Gang. Except that his name had been changed to Luke.

But as time went on Luke gained a reputation of being not only one of the best poker players in Camp but also one of the biggest eaters. He could put away an incredible pile of beans and corn bread. And when Rabbit took up a Store Order Luke would buy all sorts of Free World groceries with his poker winnings — apples, bananas and cookies, raw carrots and sardines. Every day he bought a quart of milk. He'd spread his jacket out on the ground, lay down on his back, open the container and drink the whole quart at once, gulping it down in one long, bubbling draught.

He was a natural. But in addition to his native aptitude he was given valuable lessons in technique from Curly. Recognizing Luke as a talented challenger to his position as the camp's biggest eater, Curly taught him all sorts of esoteric tricks of the trade. It was Curly who gave him the extra-large tablespoon that he carried, digging it out of his

locker where he had it stashed away as a spare, giving it to Luke with a big grin.

"Here, Luke. Use this. That little toy you got there ain't big enough to keep a man alive."

Curly could eat. But he could work too. This is what kept him out of the Box in the old days when he would eat so much supper that the count was held up when the men checked into the Building for the night. Carr and the Wicker Man stood outside on the porch. The guards sat on the gun platforms. The captain was rocking and spitting in front of his Office. The cooks and trustees stood by in the kitchen. The Walking Boss sat in the Messhall, standing guard over Curly who sat there all alone — eating.

That was how he won the unique distinction of having the legal right to get in at the head of the chow line, this privilege granted by personal orders of the Captain himself.

It was inevitable that the day should come. It was hot and the Bull Gang had spent all day in a drainage ditch in water up to their waists, cutting out the dense undergrowth of briars and willows and palmettos with bush axes. Luke had worked like a fiend, slashing away at twice the speed of anyone else, lopping off the fronds and branches with forehand and backhand strokes of ferocity. But because of the temperature and because we weren't very far from Camp, the Bull Gang was the first squad to check in from the road.

Luke was the first man to reach the Messhall door, limping and staggering, his pants and shoes soaking wet with mud and slime. Everyone waited for the other squads to come in. Finally the Patch Squad arrived and then Curly came up, stepping right in front of Luke with a grin.

Everybody made jokes and wisecracks. The two double-gut giants stood by the screen door, grinding their teeth and stomping their feet, their spoons held in their hands at the ready, glittering in the sunset.

Boss Higgins was the Walking Boss in charge of the Messhall that night. He went inside. Taking his position by the kitchen door, he gave the signal.

Curly and Luke each grabbed a plate and leaped to the line of pots where one trustee was serving the scrap of fat back and another the catheads.

On this particular night the Dog Boy ladled up the main dish, a concoction of stewed potatoes. It was a soft, overcooked mess but not really bad at all. But for the big eaters it was a pure blessing. Ordinarily they always chewed a mouthful of food just twice and then swallowed. But on this night they didn't have to chew at all.

Before the sixth man had filed inside Curly and Luke were standing by the door, their empty plates dangling in bored, innocent hands. They ignored our grins, scowls and insulting whispers, calmly waiting there for the end of the line to come through so they could get seconds.

Then again they leaped to their places with over-heaped plates, their spoons scooping in a whipped blur as they slopped, slurped and swallowed and jumped up neck and neck to go back for more.

This time the Dog Boy stacked up their plates with a mountainous heap, never believing they could finish it and getting a vicious thrill out of the Heat he imagined they were bringing down upon themselves from the Free Man.

But they polished off that serving in less than sixty seconds and returned once again. And then we knew. For the first time in over three years, Curly's title was being seriously challenged.

The whole drama was acted out in silent pantomime. We couldn't cheer, shout or make bets. But we expressed our glee and our befuddlement with our eyes, our nods, fingers and smiles.

Reluctantly we finished up our own pitifully small portions. One by one we got up and stepped outside to

wash off our spoons under the faucet, to take off our shoes and empty our pockets to allow the Floorwalker to shake us down. Inside the Messhall, a few brave ones were still dawdling, risking the wrath of the Free Man in order to witness at first hand this incredible contest.

Four plates and then five. The Dog Boy's remarks became louder and more cutting. Being a trustee he had the right to speak aloud in the Messhall. And being a Judas whose job was to train the bloodhounds and to chase escaping convicts, and being a natural son of a bitch besides, he tried his very best to put the Heat on the gulping, swelling duet.

"Damn. Ain't never seen such gluttons. Keep on and the State's liable to go broke feedin' 'em. Here boy! Soooooeeeee! You want some more slops? *Soooeeeee!*"

But the Free Man simply observed the proceedings from his chair in the corner, clutching his ulcered stomach with his fingers. Then he growled out impatiently.

"Them two are the best Rollers in Camp. Boss Godfrey says Luke's able to do more work than any man in the Bull Gang. A man sure as hell cain't work if he don't eat right. Ah only wish ah could eat like that. Ah'd give anything."

And that shut up the Dog Boy who had come dangerously close to putting the Finger on himself.

After six plates of stewed potatoes each, the pot was empty. With a sigh of regret, Curly started to rise. But then Jabo the Cook came out with two aluminum bowls of stewed prunes that were left over from the guards' table at breakfast. He offered them to Curly and Luke and then sat down on the bench opposite them, holding his chin in his hand and watching.

Babalugats was the last Gunman left in the Messhall. But then he could tarry no longer and came out to break the news to the rest of us who were clinging to the bars and wire of the windows, waiting for some word.

They both spit out the last pit at the same time to set the

metal bowls ringing in an affirmative major chord.

Sardonically the Cook offered to get them still another bowl but Curly was too cunning. He realized that if they ran the thing into the ground there was a serious risk of getting into trouble. They had had their fun. But they didn't want to become Wise Guys.

They left the Messhall, waddling with short, stiff-legged steps, their bellies swollen painfully. Then Curly stopped and twisted his big torso on his hips, letting go with a truly magnificent fart. Luke grinned, raised his right leg and answered the call, trumpeting far over the distant groves dim with the shadows of dusk.

It was a draw.

But to have eaten Curly to a draw was such an outstanding accomplishment that Luke's fame was immediately established. Shortly afterwards, Curly was made a trustee. No longer working under the gun, his appetite fell off considerably and although he had retired undefeated, Luke became the new Intestinal Champion.

And then one night while playing poker he managed to bluff his way into stealing a pot of a dollar and sixty-five cents. Everyone else had thrown in his hand except Bullshit Bill who was holding a pair of aces. But when Luke raised the last bet a dollar he refused to call the raise. After dragging in the nickles, dimes and quarters, Luke showed his hand to Bullshit Bill. He had a pair of nothing. Smiling, he murmured softly.

"Just remember, man. Wherever you go and whatever you do. Always play a real cool hand."

And from that night on he always answered to the name of Cool Hand Luke.

9

MANY MONTHS PASSED BY. SOME OF THE Oldcocks went home. Some more Newcocks drove up. One day the Bull Gang was lying in the shade, resting and smoking after our beans. Somehow the conversation got around to the bottomless chasm of Luke's stomach. I could hear Dragline nearby talking to Society Red, a young college man from Boston who had been sent up from Miami Beach for hanging five thousand dollars worth of paper in a half-dozen night clubs, restaurants and hotels after his checking account had gone dry.

Dragline was enjoying himself, bragging and exaggerating with abandon, as though Luke's gastronomical exploits, by virtue of being his buddy's, were somehow part of his own achievements.

"Eat? Haw! You ain't never seen nobody really eat. One Sunday Luke and Curly chipped in to buy a gallon of ice cream. But the Laundry Boy and the Cap'n got hung up in town and didn't git back until right after dinner. And we had somethin' special that day, meat of some kind or other. They couldn't wait for the ice cream. So they went in and had three helpin's each. Stuffed themselves like billy goats. And then when the ice cream finally did show up they just sat there on the front porch like a couple of kids. They had eight pint containers between 'em and they ate up every gawd damn drop."

"You don't say, Dragline?" said Society Red.

"Eat? One night ah saw him eat ten Hershey bars and drink seven Pepsi Colas in no more than fifteen minutes time."

"Ten Hersheys and seven Pepsis? In fifteen minutes? Now

wait a minute. Don't think I'm that much of a Newcock. I'm just an Oldcock in a new place that's all."

"You don't believe it?"

Dragline sat up and slapped his hand on his chest with a resounding thud.

"Ah've seen it wif mah own eyes! These two right here."

"Oh, come on Clarence."

"Clarence? Clarence? What the hell do you mean — *Clarence*? You callin' me a gawd damn liar? Ah'm tellin' yuh. That there boy of mine can *eat*. He could eat a three-foot two-by-four — raw. He could chomp up and swallow a hatful of rusty nails — broken bottles — anything. Eff'n you'd so kindly oblige as to let me cut yore gawd damn haid off, why, he'd eat *that*."

Luke lay there a few feet away, paying no attention to the commotion. Serenely he smoked his butt and stared up at the clouds. And then quietly he spoke with matter-of-fact simplicity.

"Five dollars says I can eat fifty hard-boiled eggs."

"*Fifty eggs*?" said Society Red, sitting up with interest.

Dragline did a double take, blinked his eyes, stared at Cool Hand Luke with a stricken expression, gulped, shook his head and then bravely nodded, jabbing his finger at Society Red for emphasis.

"You're gawd damn right he kin. Eff'n he says he kin do it, it's done. And ah got five dollars more says he kin."

Society sat up straight, rearranged his cap and squinted thoughtfully.

"Well, I have news for both you Southern gentlemen. I'll just take that bet."

A few minutes later Boss Godfrey interrupted the proceedings by ordering everybody back to work. Quickly Dragline sidled over to Luke, shoveling away with fury.

“Damn, Luke! What’s the matter with you? We done bet ten whole god damn dollars that you can eat — oh, Christ Almighty! Ah hates to even think about it. That you can *eat* — *fifty* eggs. Fifty eggs, boy. Ah backed you up. Yeah. But don’t ask me why. Habit, ah reckon. You’re mah buddy. But gawd damn — damn it Luke. What’s the matter with you?”

“Don’t worry Dragline. We got a dead-lock on that mullet. We just can’t lose.”

“We can’t? You sure the Bear ain’t caught yuh now?”

“Positive.”

“Well. Ah don’t know. Ah hates to let it be said ah didn’t back up a buddy. But — Luke. *Fifty* eggs! Think o’ that, man. Think!”

“Ah *am* thinkin’ Dragline. Ah’m thinkin’ this is a golden chance for us to pick up some easy money. And for me to get some extra Free World groceries besides. All we gotta do is play it real cool.”

“Cool? You call that cool? Makin’ a wild, rambunctious bet like that? Oh, Lawd. What did ah do? Ah done stole and tole lies. Ah have loved mah neighbor and his wife. But what — *what* did ah evah do to deserve a lunatic like this to come here into mah happy home and beat me outta mah hard-earned bread?”

But we were convinced that it was an opportunity for us to pick up some easy money. The word wafted up and down the ditch that very afternoon. And for a week afterwards we talked of nothing else. The terms were arranged, the details ironed out, the regulations negotiated. One hour was decided as the time limit. The eggs were to be boiled for five minutes, to be of medium size and to be purchased by the losing party. A technical point was raised as to whether the wager stipulated that Luke *eat* the eggs or *retain* the eggs. After a long, legal battle it was decided that Luke would be permitted to leave the table and to use the toilet at any time. Digestion and defecation could only be

taken as incontrovertible proof that the eggs had been *eaten.* But if he ever vomited, he would automatically lose by default.

The whole camp buzzed with excitement over the possibilities. Being the leading authority on such matters, Curly was consulted immediately as to his opinion of Luke's chances. But Curly was unimpressed.

His only comment was a laconic drawl, "What's the poor guy gonna drink? Boiled eggs can get mighty dry after the first dozen or two."

After two weeks of preparations, a definite Sunday was set for the contest. On Sundays one of the trustees is always taken into the next town with a Store Order list to make purchases of odds and ends for the men in the Camp — ice cream, books, pipe tobacco, needle and thread. This time he would also have an order for four and a half-dozen eggs.

In the meantime Dragline had exerted himself for a whole weekend with his propaganda efforts, walking up and down the Building in his bare feet and his clean, wrinkled pants just issued for the week. Boldly he swaggered, pounding on his naked chest with his fist.

"Ah knows he kin do it. He's mah workin' buddy. Ah got faith in that there boy o' mine. Ah'm the one what taught him all he knows. And ah got fifty fuckin' green lookin' dollahs out yonder in the Cap'n's Office what says he kin do it. Ah'll bet any swingin' dick anything he wants to bet."

But Society Red's sophisticated arguments were just as persuasive. His was the application of logic, reason, realistic anatomy. And a powerful influence that prodded us on was the fact that even Koko seemed to be on Society's side.

We didn't know it then but Koko was secretly acting as a shill. He made phony bets with Dragline and argued that fifty eggs would make about three quarts and weigh at least six pounds. In full voice he claimed that the eggs would

swell up in Luke's belly and kill him. Or Luke himself would swell up. He would drown, choke, give up or faint. Dragline was adamant, challenging and daring us all.

And in the sheer ferocity of that challenge we cowered. We suspected that we were being conned somehow. Yet we couldn't bring ourselves to believe in the impossible. So in the end we were bullied and cajoled into putting our money where our mouth was.

For the rest of the week Luke went into training. Out on the road Dragline waited on him personally, heaping up his plate with beans and corn bread and watching him like a mother hawk.

"Eat them beans, bastard. Drink some more water too. And stay away from them candy bars tonight. We ain't got but three more days. We gotta git that double-gut o' yours stretched and strained. We gotta git you in fightin' shape. Like a barrage balloon."

"Why, you toothless bastard. If I had a belly like yours we wouldn't have nothin' to worry about."

"Like mine? Hell, ah don't eat much."

"Maybe not. But just look at the size of that gut."

"Well, hell. Don't you know how come that to be? That's a sign ah got me an affectionate nature."

"Affectionate? Like an elephant you mean?"

"Maybe. Maybe so. Why not? Ah read in a book once that when an elephant's makin' love it takes him two days and two nights to git his gun off. But when he does make it — man, look out."

"That's you, huh?"

"Sho! Ah'm an affectionate son of a bitch. Ah jes cain't help mahself."

The week came to an end. Saturday we began our usual weekend activities. But instead of loafing around and playing poker, Cool Hand Luke and Dragline spent the

morning out on the lawn sparring with the old, worn-out boxing gloves. At noon Luke ate very little. He did some calisthenics in the afternoon and walked up and down the Building, stopping every few minutes to cup his hands under the faucet for a drink.

Then the impossible happened. Luke didn't eat any supper. And later, after we checked in for the night, Luke had Carr ask the Wicker Man for a couple of Brown Bombers and a cup of Epsom Salts.

Society Red began to protest. This was the same as doping a race horse with a needle. But nothing had been mentioned in the contest rules about taking a physic. Nobody liked the idea but we had to admit that it was legal. So all evening and the next morning we glumly watched as Cool Hand made trip after trip to the john.

It was Sunday. The big day. As we expected, Luke didn't have any breakfast. Instead he drank water and did push-ups and boxed a couple of rounds with Dragline. It was nearly noon when the Trustee and the Yard Man got back from town with the Store Order.

We didn't waste any time. We knew that Cool Hand was getting hungrier and hungrier. About six of us formed an official cooking committee and ran around to the back of the Building where there is a huge cast-iron pot raised up on bricks which is used by the Laundry Boy to boil out our clothes. The pot was ready. We had already filled it halfway with the hose and built a fire under it out of fat pine kindling. By the time the Store Order arrived it was just beginning to boil.

Carefully we took all the eggs out of the cardboard cartons and put them in a big paper bag. Cautiously, with tongues sticking out and with bated breath, we lifted up the bag and slowly lowered the whole thing into the pot, the paper dissolving almost instantly and the eggs settling gently to the bottom. Babalugats went over to the fence and

asked Boss Shorty who was on the platform to time them for us. Then he came back to the rest of us standing and squatting around the pot, studiously watching it boil.

When Boss Shorty yelled out that they were ready we used the coffee can that the Laundry Boy measures soap with, bailing out the water and putting out the fire. When we could reach the eggs we used our spoons and sticks of wood clamped together like chopsticks, fishing them out and laying them on the ground to cool off.

We had no more bags so we brought the eggs inside the Building carried in our caps, five or six of us in a single file gingerly coming in with our caps in our hands as though they were the nests of exotic birds. Triumphantly we lay our fragile burdens on the poker table, counted them, put the four extras away and then counted them again.

The poker table was cleared. Everyone was ordered to stand back. Only Luke and his coaches and trainers were allowed to sit on the bench. Then the surprise. Koko stepped forward and admitted that he had worked to con us into betting against Luke. So he was allowed to take his place with Curly and Dragline who were sitting with owlish seriousness at the table. There was some more haggling. Luke's handlers declared their intention to peel the eggs for him. We argued. Society Red virtually screamed. But finally even he had to admit that the bet was only to eat the eggs in one hour. However, we won a small concession, Cool Hand's team agreeing not to begin peeling the eggs until the official time was started.

So everything was set.

Boss Shorty had just been relieved by another guard who took his shotgun and pistol. Then he came inside the Building with Boss Higgins to see what was going on. Everyone gathered round. Dice and poker, boxing, reading, howling, wallet manufacturing, grab-ass, haircuts, sleeping, listening to radios, letter writing, making jewel boxes out of

hundreds of wooden matches all glued together and sandpapered — all the normal activities of the weekend were suspended. Everyone was silent. We waited. Outside we could hear the clump of Luke's feet and his deep breathing as he did side-straddle hops. Then he stopped.

We sat and we stood and we waited. Luke came in, sweating from his exercise. Then he went to his bunk and got a towel, undressed and came back to the shower, walking on the balls of his feet. Seemingly unaware of our hushed presence, he soaped and rinsed himself methodically with graceful and deliberate drama. We watched every move. We noticed how big he had grown since his arrival, how dark his skin had become. We looked at his scars. We looked at his belly, still heaving from his exercise and noticeably concave.

He dried himself off, combed his hair in the fragment of broken mirror in the corner and studiously squeezed a blackhead out of his forehead. After squinting at his reflection a moment, he wrapped the towel around his waist and went back to his bunk.

In a few minutes he came stalking back with his pants on. He stopped by the poker table, looked at the huddled family staring at him with awe, grinned and said — "Well. Is everybody ready?"

Dragline jumped up and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him forward as he puffed up his chest and stuck his chin out with belligerent pride. Slapping his fist against his chest, he announced with gusto.

"This here's mah *boy!*"

The uproar started. Last minute bets were made. We looked at Luke and then we looked at the massive pile of glittering eggs that filled the striped and muddy caps lined up on the table. Then we dug down for our last nickles and dimes, wrote out IOUs against future money orders from home, mortgaged unfinished wallets and signed ourselves

up for terms of indentured labor. All bets were covered by the Syndicate. If they lost they knew they would be in hock to the whole camp for the rest of their Time.

Everything was ready. Luke sat in the middle of the bench facing his three trainers on the other side of the table. He shuffled his feet. He twitched his toes. His stomach visibly palpitating, he swallowed continuously, his fingers trembling as they clutched at the edge of the table.

Solemnly Boss Shorty held his pocket watch, staring at the advancing seconds. At ten seconds to one o'clock he held up his right hand. Then he dropped it.

There was a tremendous roar from fifty throats as the three Peelers each grabbed an egg and cracked it on the table, their fingers flying as they stripped off the pieces of shell and the thin membrane underneath. But they were barely able to keep ahead of Cool Hand's jaws which were snapping and chomping so ferociously there was a very real occupational danger of losing a finger. Luke didn't even bother to chew. His jaw muscles flexing with dynamic power, he crushed an egg with his teeth, gulped once and it was gone — his mouth gaping wide for another.

Desperately his assistants strove to keep ahead of him, counting aloud as each egg went down. Curly worked with professional, concentrated efficiency, holding each egg out on the flat of his open, stiffened hand. But Koko held out each one with reluctance, shy of his hazardous duty and flinching every time Luke grabbed an egg out of his hand. But for Dragline it was a labor of love. Grinning, his tongue rolling around his loose and flabby lips, he gently fed them into Luke's gaping mouth with careful tenderness, his pinkie extended, like tossing a tidbit to some prehistoric monster which he alone had discovered, captured and domesticated.

"Eight — nine — ten —"

Our hearts sank in despair. Never had we seen such form,

such coordination, such tactics and control. In the first three minutes twelve eggs disappeared, gobbled down like a turkey drinking water. Then Luke went into a steady, prolonged period of disciplined labor, swallowing them down at the rate of two eggs per minute. Koko monitored the schedule, borrowing Boss Shorty's watch to hold it with studious concentration. Monotonously he chanted out the beat as Luke bit, chewed and swallowed with apparent serenity for ten minutes more.

"— twenty *seven* — twenty seconds to go — ten seconds to go — and — twenty-*eight* — twenty seconds to go — ten seconds to go — and — twenty-*nine* —"

Koko's voice was the only sound. The rest of us stood, sat or squatted in motionless postures. Stupid Blondie had his mouth open. Possum chewed his fingernails. Babalugats sat there with a fixed grin on his face. Tramp was wringing his cap. Rabbit had an unlighted cigarette dangling loosely in his lips, his eyes bulging out of his head. Onion Head's eyes were shut, his lips moving silently. Some of us had our arms folded over our chests, our heads bowed in humility. Others stood on one leg, their hands in their pockets. But Society Red couldn't take it any more and got up to pace the floor of the Building.

In the meantime Luke had become a Thing, an Appetite. He was nothing but mouth, stomach and rectum — the beginning, the middle and the end.

After the thirty-second egg he stopped. Slowly he got up from the table, stretched his arms over his head and yawned, his stomach bulging as though he were pregnant. Deliberately he began to waddle towards the water faucet. We gasped aloud. This was a man tottering at the brink of the precipice. But he fooled us, only rinsing his mouth out and gargling, without swallowing anything.

But as he leaned over for another mouthful of water, his hand cupped beneath the faucet, he let one go, breaking

wind with a clear, prolonged note, a trumpet blast of triumph and bravura. And we panicked. We choked for breath, clutched each other in dismay and headed for the door in a stumbling stampede. Outside, the guards on the platforms nervously fingered their weapons, startled by the laughing, crying, shouting, cheering and jeering mob that had rushed out the door to spread out over the lawn, only gradually returning to peer back inside with exaggerated caution and alarm.

Luke paced up and down the Building, stretching and gingerly raising first one leg and then the other. Back and forth he walked, pausing every so often to let one go with another blast. Time passed. We began to squirm. But Luke seemed in no hurry at all, calmly strolling up and down with total nonchalance. Fifteen precious minutes went by. We were in agony. Then he took his place at the table and started eating again. The air having cleared and no longer toxic, we cautiously crept back inside.

Slowly now, with obvious effort, Luke resumed his consumption rate of one egg every two minutes. Finally only eight were left. But he only had nine minutes to go. And it was easy to see that he was stalled. Only with the greatest effort could he swallow. His stomach was horribly swollen. Dragline watched him, his lips twisted all out of shape. Beads of sweat broke out on his face. No one spoke. Koko began to massage Luke's neck and shoulders. Then Curly helped him to his feet and with Dragline on the other side, walked him up and down the floor, Dragline talking to him, his voice urgent with desperate pleading.

"Come on boy. Come on, Darlin'. You can do it. Just give yourself a little time. Relax that old belly. Just let it sag a little and enjoy itself. Only eight more, old buddy. Eight more between you and everlastin' glory. Just eight little ole eggs. Pigeon eggs, that's all. Practically fish eggs, you might say."

They returned him to the bench, making Luke unbutton

his pants and anxiously checking the time with Koko. Only four minutes. Gingerly Drag peeled an egg and offered it to Luke, his toothless lips pouted in the shape of a tender kiss.

“Come on baby. Come on. Don’t be that way. Open your little ole, gator tooth mouth.”

Then Luke began to eat. After the first egg he seemed to pick up speed, downing one after the other with growing inspiration.

And it happened. We saw it happen. We dug our nails into our arms, we turned our backs, beat fists into open palms, swore terrible oaths and glared at each other in stricken agony.

But Luke managed to gulp down the last three eggs in exactly thirty-three seconds, the final gulp no more than two seconds ahead of the deadline while Koko was dancing a delirious, barefooted flamenco and Dragline was screaming encouragement into his ear.

“Eat it there boy. Bite it. Gnaw on it. Git mad at the gawd damn things. That’s it. Chew. Chew. Chew!”

Then Luke collapsed. With a groan he folded his arms on top of the table and rested his head on them, his belly sagging downward, hard as concrete, watermelon smooth, grotesque.

Society Red let out a howl.

“No! Wait a minute! No dice! He didn’t swallow that last egg. I’m telling you. He didn’t swallow it!”

“He didn’t, huh? growled Dragline. Why, you city slicker son of a bitch, you. Ah’ll prove it. Come over here.”

Angrily Dragline lifted Luke’s head by the hair, forcing his mouth open with his fingers while a group of witnesses stared down his throat to their final satisfaction. Then Luke’s head dropped back to his arms, his fingers clutching at the mounds of egg shells scattered all over the poker table.

The Camp went insane. Angrily we losers stomped up and down, cursing wildly and incoherently. There were screams, sad songs and weeping. But the Syndicate was in celebration, gleefully collecting their winnings, gloating, happily punching each other on the shoulders and waltzing around the Building. Ceremoniously, they each took one of the left-over eggs and began eating them with loud, deliberate smacking of their lips, with big grins and ostentatious pats of their bellies. Then Dragline took the very last egg and brought it over to Society Red who was sitting on his bunk, smoking a cigarette.

"Here you are, Society. Number fifty-four. You might as well have this one. You sure did pay enough for it."

Listlessly, Society Red took the egg and held it in his hand, sitting there, staring at it, saying nothing.

And for long moments there were small knots of men who loitered near the poker table staring with silent reverence and disbelief at Cool Hand's cramped, agonized form. But we had seen it. We knew it for sure. Never before had anyone ever eaten like that. And never before, by any means whatever, had anyone managed to break the entire Camp. We were penniless. There wasn't a poker game for a whole month. Arguments dangled in mid-air, unwagered. Pepsi Colas and candy bars were unsold. For we had been taken. We had been given the Slow Con.

And with slumped shoulders and shaking heads, with dazed eyes, with bewilderment and with despair, sadly and lovingly we muttered —

"Cool Hand Luke."

10

IT WAS A MONDAY. ANOTHER MONDAY. And again the Bull Gang went out on the Road to begin another week. The tool truck and the cage truck bounced and rattled over the highways and over the secondary routes maintained by the State until they made that certain turn that brought us to Bear-Caught Avenue.

We stared at each other in bewilderment as the truck made its way over the lonely, narrow road that winds through the empty countryside, We jolted and swayed over the low sandy hills and past the sparse orange groves, trying to think of what kind of work needed to be done out there. The bushes had already been cut in the ditches, piled up in heaps, dried out and then burned. The rainy season was over and there were no washouts that needed to be filled. Nor was there any yo-yoing to be done.

For sixteen miles we drove through the woods and the prairies and the uncultivated fields. It was already hot, the thick vegetation blocking off any breezes and also throwing off its own heat.

And way out there in the middle of nowhere many a good man has been bear-caught, which is to be stricken with heat exhaustion and sunstroke. Your muscles cramp, your mouth is dry, your face is cold and yet sweating, your stomach knotted and nauseous. You are dizzy and your vision is blurred. You are weak. You stagger. Even your voice is affected and becomes a mere croak.

So we looked at each other and wondered. Then the trucks came to a halt at the end of the road. It was a dead-end. The pavement went right up to a thick wall of bushes and then stopped, right there. Quickly we unloaded,

hurriedly snatching our last minute smokes. The guards spread out. Jim handed down our shovels and we stood there in a group on one side. We waited. But Boss Godfrey gave no command nor sign.

After fifteen minutes of just standing there, wondering what was up, a yellow pickup truck appeared up the road. It pulled over to one side and stopped and then we saw the letters painted on the door — S.R.D.

Boss Godfrey strolled over and began talking to the engineers who made motions with their hands, gesticulating towards the road and towards the horizon.

But still there were no orders. We shifted our weight from one leg to the other, smoking, leaning on our shovel handles and mumbling to ourselves. Then we saw the tank truck coming and recognized it as the cumbersome machine that sprays hot, liquid asphalt on the surface of a road in order to make a new top. But there must always be an aggregate mixed with the asphalt to give it strength and thickness. Ordinarily a fleet of trucks will dump piles of clean beach sand alongside a road that is to be sprayed. Then we follow along behind the tank truck spreading sand with our shovels. There is a certain way to do it, a clever twist on the handle at the exact moment of the swing and the sand will fan out into long, triangular, finely powdered areas.

But this time there were no piles of clean sand. We would have to dig away the grass and the topsoil in the ditch bottoms to reach the gray Florida loam beneath.

Dragline spit a stream of tobacco juice, shook his head and muttered half aloud,

“Oh man. Oh, man. Here’s where the shit hits the fan.”

The tank truck turned around at the dead-end and then came back and stopped in the exact center of the road. The two S.R.D. men got out and adjusted a sliding pole attached to the front bumper. At the end of the pole was a vertical

antenna that they used as a guide for steering. Then they mounted the rear platform and began fiddling with levers and wheels, adjusting valves and looking at gauges. A fire was roaring inside the furnace under the tank. There was steam and smoke. There was the stench of hot tar. Across the rear of the truck was a heavy pipe with spray nozzles spaced every few inches. It was made in sections that the men unhinged and adjusted so it would reach from one edge of the road to the other.

When the temperatures and the pressures were just right, the driver got in the cab and started up the motor. We were ready. Rabbit had collected our jackets and shirts. We had spaced ourselves on both sides of the road about ten feet apart, the guards well behind us, standing on top of the ditch bank. Our belts were hitched up and our caps readjusted, our breaths held in expectation.

With a pounding roar of the big diesel motor and a snorting blast of air pressure, the truck took off, the nozzles spraying black fountains of tar which left behind a long, hot glistening puddle.

Then the Bull Gang did its stuff.

Each line of men sanded the opposite side of the road, the shovel pans flashing in long, scintillating arcs of shining steel; arms flexing, chest muscles contracting, backs knotting up and relaxing, wrists twisting with expert finesse as the layers of sand shot across the road in swift avalanches streaking over the black glaciers of tar, here — there — the seventeen of us frantic in our labor, knowing that we would get no Smoking Period, our only breaks to be while waiting for the spray truck to return with still another load of asphalt.

And so we rolled.

We rolled for a week; a week of madness, of agony and enthusiasm. Our shovel handles were slimy with sweat, our bodies covered with mud, our lungs choked with the stench

of the tar and its heat and with the cloud of dust that billowed away behind us.

It took about fifteen minutes for the truck to empty its load and then it would roar off to the S.R.D. yard in Oakland for still another. And we trailed along about a quarter of a mile behind, doing our utmost to finish a shot in time to have a few minutes in which to collapse on the ditch bank, to stretch out flat, to gulp down water, to roll up and light a smoke. But in no time at all the truck would return and we would be called to our feet to line up in position, waiting until the truck's apparatus was made ready.

We stood there leaning on our shovels, each in his own way. Some tucked the end of the handle under their armpits, others within folded hands that propped up their chins, still others holding them at arm's length. Some stood with legs spread apart, others with one foot resting on the shovel blade — all of us balanced, idle, laconic, waiting for the truck to start off again.

Our chests were still heaving from the exertions of the last truckload, the sweat pouring off our bodies, our pants sopping, dripping wet. Our brogans were so full of perspiration we made sloshing noises with every limping, staggering step. All of us were dizzy and exhausted. Everything was blurred, shadowed and out of focus, a whole herd of wild bears wandering among the bushes, ready to pounce upon us at any moment, furry visions climbing up our backs to hug us tight with mammoth arms.

But the further we went the closer we came to Oakland. And the quicker the truck could return with its load. It became too much for us. We couldn't possibly keep up. So on the second morning out there we were joined by the little Bull Gang and in the afternoon both Patch Squads came out. The next day even some of the trustees were given shovels. Everybody was there. The champions of the whole camp faced each other in an open skirmish line on

opposing sides of the road.

You do not know the things that can be done with a shovel, the distance that dirt can be pitched, the accuracy, the speed. And during this week the project became a tournament. For the one remaining way in which we can still show our defiance of the great, golden authority that hovers above us all is to do even more than is demanded, to show our contempt by working faster, better and harder, to serve its omnipotence willingly and with inspiration, enjoying it even.

So the old slogans and the war cries began to snap out in the heat and the flying dust. The Silent System was broken. We were out in the wilderness where there were no Free People and no one really cared much if he were to be put in the Box. It would be almost a break, even a privilege.

Partnerships were formed, little cliques, pairs and quartets. Cool Hand Luke, Dragline and Koko formed a working team that challenged anyone and everyone on the other side of the road, racing, trying to see who could finish a sector first and then move on up to the head of the line to begin another.

The old rule was suspended and we were no longer required to yell out, 'Gettin' on up here, Boss!' And now the Terrible Trio even began to run in its eager impatience to move forward and begin shoveling again.

The clumps of dirt spun through the air to explode on the road in a barrage of spraying sand and splashing asphalt, the air crisscrossed with hurtling, twisting projectiles. And the whoops were yelled back and forth in defiance and challenge, those old, old phrases, those bravuras of the Chain Gang.

"Go hard, bastard! Go hard!"

"When it gets rough, get rough with it!"

"Yahoo! Let the Good Time roll!"

“If you hadn’t stole, you wouldn’t hafta roll!”

“Mud! Mud! Gimme some gawd damn mud!”

The Free Men very nearly had to trot to keep up with our pace. They advanced through the orange trees, the weeds and bushes beside the road, knowing there was a dangerous mood in the air and that anything at all might happen. At the point of the advancing column two guards were walking backwards, one on either side of the road. Two more brought up the rear. Others were spread out behind our backs, boxing us in, their guns ready and on the alert.

Boss Kean chewed his quid, squinted and looked worried. Boss Paul’s smile was fixed and eternal. Boss Shorty smoked his pipe, the shotgun across his shoulders behind his neck, clutching it with both hands while cautiously walking backwards through the grass and the palmettos. Boss Smith watched us from beneath knitted brows, saliva at the corner of his lips, his pistol belt sagging awkwardly to one side as it slipped down his skinny hips.

In the meanwhile the other walking bosses had surrendered their authority to Boss Godfrey who brought up the rear of the double column of convicts, walking right down the middle of the tarred and dusted road and pointing at the thin spots with his cane. As though it were the baton of a sorcerer, a burst of sand would explode wherever he pointed. All day long he strolled across the countryside enveloped in a furious cloud of dust, casually inventing hot saharas with his Walking Stick.

Hour by hour and day by day the week crawled by. On Tuesday afternoon a Newcock let go with a swing of the shovel, lost his balance, spun around in a complete circle and dropped flat on his back in the ditch, his eyes rolling, his mouth open, his chest wheezing in rapid, shallow movements. Jim and Rabbit carried him to the cage truck and shoved him inside, Boss Godfrey padlocking the door.

It got hotter. The Water Boys ran back and forth with

their buckets to quench the insatiable thirsts of the double column of lunatics that trotted over the lonely road, hurling sand, digging, kicking, spinning their shovel handles in their slick, calloused hands with that certain gesture, pitching and throwing, going on to the head of the line to begin all over again, yowling as they went with manic laughs of absolute glee.

Then another day would end and we would load up, the cage truck and squad trucks and tool trucks and guard trailers all forming a convoy spaced out for a quarter of a mile roaring over the side roads and the highways and the expressways of the county. Every night we pulled into Camp and dismounted. Squad by squad we lined up on the sidewalk and waited to be shaken down, standing there with our heads bared to the Captain, our clothes and bodies covered with filth, our ears ringing, our heads aching and dizzy. Then the Yard Man opened the gate and we started through. But as we counted off our voices came out as strangled croaks, our mouths and throats like dry cotton. And as we staggered into the yard we all had trouble finding the Messhall door to line up for our rice and beans. Everything was blurred, thick, shadowed and out of focus.

For we were bear-caught. All of us. The entire camp. Everybody.

After supper we dragged ourselves inside the Building, took a shower and fell into our bunks, our back and leg muscles stiff and cramped, our hands sore, our heads aching. Some men passed out completely, like logs, but others spent the night tossing, their limbs twitching as they shoveled their way through their dreams. The First Bell rang in the morning and we forced ourselves to get up, to put on our wet shoes and pants and weakly fall out into the yard and the dark chilly air to have breakfast and line up and count through the gate and then line up again, standing there waiting, dreaming, listening to the howls of Big Blue, the bloodhound. Another day began, the four

squads of Gunmen loading up into the trucks, the trustees coming out later after they had helped the cooks clean up after breakfast. Again, the entire camp was out on the Road, doing battle on Bear-Caught Avenue.

All of us were there:

Ugly Red, the moonshiner; Four Eyed Joe, who is doing Time for screwing his daughter; Little Greek, the sponge diver and check artist from Tarpon Springs; Big Steve, the heist man; Rabbit, Coon, Possum, Gator and Eagle, all characters from the tales of Uncle Remus; Sleepy, the last of the Seven Dwarfs, whose six partners all got away when the cops arrived; Onion Head; Burr Head; Stupid Blondie, Stupider Blondie and Stupidest Blondie; Chief, the Blackfoot Indian, the con man and chronic liar whose true exploits are just fantastic enough to keep everyone guessing about the others; Ears, who has all of it, who looks like a taxi coming down the road with both front doors open, our only Lifer; Koko, the twenty-three-year-old Canadian burglar who has twelve more years to serve; Cottontop, the idiot from Oklahoma; Babalugats, a four-time loser, pulling five years for creeping the Miami mansion of Al Capone's brother; Blind Dick, the self-styled sex maniac who proudly shows you the pictures and the article in Coronet magazine showing him being mauled by a posse after three days of frantic flight and pursuit in the Everglades; Alibi Moe; Tramp; Bullshit Bill; Preacher, whose mother is a policewoman in Jacksonville and who is doing a three spot for stealing a cow; Loudmouth Steve, the juvenile delinquent; Society Red; Blackie, the bigamist; Dynamite, who finished a year for stealing a car, was free for six days, stole a car with which to return home to Connecticut, had a wreck, was caught and given three more years — all of us were there; the big ones and the little ones, the cagey and stupid ones, the quiet and the shy and the guilty, the gray and the nameless as well as the bold ones, the wild ones who bore the names of barbarian warriors.

This was the Family, our true family. There were fifty-four of us all together and there was nothing that we hadn't done. There was no dream that we had not dreamed. There was no crime that we had not committed.

We went out in the morning and we rolled all day. Then we loaded up and went back to Camp. But on Wednesday the convoy of trucks turned off on an alternate route that brought us roaring along the back roads and past the edge of Lake Apopka. Somewhere near Ferndale the cage truck stopped at an intersection waiting for an opening in the swarm of southbound traffic before making the turn. Behind us the entire black and yellow convoy closed up in a bunch, the motors racing, the guards vigilant, the men in the open squad trucks clustered together like a swarm of bees.

Right in the corner of the two roads was a juke joint, three jalopies parked in front, a red neon sign in the window reading *Budweiser*, music drifting from a juke box through the screen door with a big rip near the bottom. Then a woman came out and walked across the rutted yard of crushed shell. She was a large and buxom brunette wearing a bar maid's apron and moved towards us with an open, eager smile. We looked at her, catching our breath. Bear-caught or no bear-caught we were tantalized by the sight of her face, her breasts, her legs.

But all the while she had been carrying a small gray kitten in her hand. Just as the cage truck started up she suddenly held it up in the air and yelled out so all of us could hear,

"Hey! Do yo'll want a *pussy?*"

Without thought or agreement or hesitation, from right out of our guts and our chests and throats there was one, spontaneous, unified roar that went echoing over the countryside; a single, sharp yell that drowned out the whine of gears and pistons and wheels and violated every

Chain Gang rule there was, the whole Family letting out one violent, grated howl of eagerness, of desire, of daring, of torment — "*YEEEAAAHHHH!!!*"

But when we got into Camp there was nothing said. No one was called out to go down to the Box. Our breach of discipline was simply ignored.

Thursday began as just one more day of following the spray truck and spreading sand in its wake, of covering the surface of the pool of asphalt in our own immediate area, pitching a shovel load at the spot where Boss Godfrey pointed with his Stick and then running up to the head of the line to start all over again.

By then Cool Hand Luke had already emerged as the master of the Family. He was the absolute Champion. None of us could keep up with the grueling pace of his day-long fury, even the biggest, the strongest and the fastest men all falling behind, unable to match his turbulent frenzy. Koko was forced to drop back, his chest heaving, his knees shaking as he slowed down to the mediocre pace of the rest of us. Even Dragline had to slow down.

But Luke surged on ahead without his working partners. All the Rollers from the other squads went insane trying to keep up with him, trying to match his speed and his skill, his cries and his whoops of exuberance. But Luke's shovel did scribbled arabesques in the sun. He did not kick at the blade, bend the handle over his knee, swing back, let fly and twist — Luke simply stabbed the shovel into the earth and brought it up and around in one smooth, roundhouse motion, throwing the load in a cross-hand stroke without hesitation or pause.

And this is the way you saw us that Friday as we began to approach the civilized frontiers of the Free World. You sat on the porches of your farmhouses and on the patios of your split-levels, drinking iced drinks and fanning yourselves, resting in the shade to alleviate the effects of

the hundred and five degree heat wave that had overwhelmed central Florida for that whole week. You sat in your shiny new cars and waited in the line that formed up behind the trustee with the red flag. The tank truck went by empty. Soon a large dust cloud appeared down the road and began to drift towards you. Within that cloud you could see us, a gang of half-naked, laughing demons dancing an exuberant ballet of labor. We came closer. You could hear the tinkling shackles on the legs of the Chain Men. You saw the rolling cage, the melodrama of armed guards, the vertical white stripes on the sides of our sopping wet pant legs, the numbers painted on our buttocks.

Luke was right there in the lead. His chest was streaked with mud and sweat and spattered drops of tar, his shovel twinkling and flashing with a paroxysm of energy. The guards and the convicts began to pass. And behind that column came the tall, obscure figure of the Walking Boss; the Man in the Black Hat; the Man With No Eyes; Boss Godfrey himself advancing through the grit and the mists while creating miracles with his Stick; pointing (*blop*) here (*splat*) there (*splop*) and strolling over the landscape on a huge gray carpet of sand that unrolled majestically beneath his feet.

11

ALL THAT SPRING WE WORKED OUR WAY back and forth across the frontiers, the verticals and diagonals of our section of The Hard Road. And it was yo-yo, shovel and bush axe all the way — up and down the whole of Lake County and along the edges of Orange County and Sumter County, from the big towns of Leesburg, Tavares and Apopka to the tiny villages of Zellwood, Crow's Bluff, Lady Lake, Okahumpka, Umatilla, Astatula and Howey-in-the-Hills.

Then they sent us out on Eyeball Boulevard which is really Route Number 441. For a week we graded the shoulders, cutting down the excess dirt formed by the gradual settling of the pavement and shaving off the sods of grass that had accumulated, both forming pools of water on the highway whenever it rained, like the rims of a saucer. Measuring the required angles with levels and surveyor's rulers, using stakes and lines, we cut down the shoulders with our shovels until we had achieved a precise angle to the slope.

Or on the other hand we would sometimes find washouts caused by the heavy summer rains and we would throw up dirt from the ditch bottoms. Then following along behind us would come the Fine Graders who put the finishing touches on the slope, shaving it down with great exactitude, handling their razor-sharp shovels like fine instruments to leave the earth square and perfectly smooth and decorated with a useless but handsome layer of sand expertly thrown over the finished sector to make it as perfect as a billiard table.

And the Fine Graders of the Bull Gang were the Terrible

Trio; Koko, Dragline and Luke. They were the ones with the skill and the strength and above all with the status that entitled them to this position of authority. And along with their responsibilities went the privilege of Eyeballing, a license discreetly exercised and never granted officially but a tangible right nevertheless.

The rest of us did the heavy work, breaking the ground for the aristocrats in the rear. But we too were able to take advantage of the wonders and the beauties of Eyeball Boulevard. Years of practice had taught us the art and a certified eyeballer can be staring at his feet and shoveling all day in a perfect frenzy. But all the while he is staring into the burnished pan of his shovel which catches the reflection of a chrome plated hub cap whirling by on the road. And in that infinite glimpse he catches the spinning vision of a distant window behind his back, in the frame of which there is the flash of a polished doorknob reflecting around the edge of a doorway to capture on its rounded surface the distorted image of a woman removing her housecoat and putting on a brassiere.

For a whole week we worked on Eyeball Boulevard. There were sentimental lumps in our chests, in our throats and in our pants as our eyes watered with frustration. Yet we showed not a sign, stoic, calm, concentrating on our labors, pretending to be unaware of the fancy homes, the enticing billboards, Cadillacs, kids, gardens, blonds and brunettes, restaurants, bars, sport clothes — everything. But secretly and discreetly our eyeballs bulged and strained. Every passing car was inspected for raised skirts, shorts, halters and low-cut dresses.

It was a wild, impossible week. Miracles occurred every day. From the orange juice canning plant at Plymouth all the way to Apopka, three miles up the road, we worked our way through the suburbs of Paradise. By a stroke of luck four Newcocks had arrived just in time to take the Heat off the rest of us who in the meantime weren't missing a thing.

Because we know all about those beauties way out there that you don't even suspect. The traffic lights on a rain-swept Free World street that are like emeralds and rubies. The ordinary citizen strolling into a bank for some change who walks with the ponderous righteousness of a Caesar. A fat, homely woman walking a dog on a leash who becomes in the wink of a passing eye a voluptuous Diana out on the hunt. Oh, the beer signs! The grocery stores! Shoes shining there in the window!

Early on Tuesday afternoon the entire squad was herded across the road to do some work on the other side. For a moment we stood there in a cluster, waiting for the signal to cross while the guards shifted their positions. The traffic was thick and had slowed to a crawl as we stood there peeking through the windows of the Buicks, Chewies and Fords, looking at bulging bosoms, thighs, bellies swelling against the cloth of bright colored summer dresses.

Then a convertible crawled by in the congestion and stopped behind a truck. We didn't move. Our faces revealed no expression. But we could have reached out and touched the voluptuous blond who sat there cringing in the stare of our eyes, tugging at the hem of her skirt to pull it down below her knees.

The car began to move again, a succession of semitrailers, pickups and busses taking its place. There was a gap in the traffic, we were given the signal, crossed the road and resumed our work. But for a full fifteen minutes our heads reeled with the memory of the vision, our nostrils clogged with the lingering odor of perfume, of whiskey, the smell of her sex and skin that had wafted out to us in a cloying, strangulating aroma. There wasn't a word in the Bull Gang as we went on with our chores. But we were busily inhaling, analyzing those various scents that contrasted so strongly with the hot, dirty, sweaty smells of our own world — lipstick, rouge, face powder, fresh clean skin, eau de cologne and Canadian Club.

Dragline said it; for all of us.

"Damn. Damn. Ah been chain gangin' so long ah'm gittin' so's ah kin sniff jes like a bloodhound."

The following day Dragline appeared out on the road wearing a cracked, broken pair of sunglasses that he had picked up somewhere in a ditch. One arm was gone and he had attached that side to his ear with a piece of string.

Luke grinned at him and drawled, "Well, lookee here. Ole Clark Gable's joined up with us. In disguise. But damn if it don't look just like my old friend, Fat Boy."

Dragline scowled back at him.

"Man, you got no 'magination a-tall. These here are mah Eyeballin' glasses. Like Boss Godfrey's got. Ah'm a-gonna play peekaboo at all that young pussy struttin' up and down the road. With these here things on none of them fuckin' shotgun guards can tell which a-way ah'm a-lookin'. Get it, you ignoramus?"

Then came that historic event branded on the collective memory of the camp, the incident which would be whispered about, rhymed and sung, subtracted, divided and multiplied into the pure, ultimate form of legend.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, a sixteen-year-old girl got off a school bus and came walking along the edge of the highway with her books in her arms, walking right through the middle of the Bull Gang as sassy as could be. She strutted by with swinging hips, with quivering breasts and eyes that pretended to look elsewhere, a saucy expression only half concealed in the deliberate pout of her lips.

Several impossibilities happened with staggering rapidity. The girl turned up the driveway, crossed the front lawn and entered the house. But in five minutes she came out again, wearing a scanty, two-piece bathing suit. With complete unconcern for the seventeen convicts and four Free Men not a hundred feet away who watched her with

dizzy rapture, she spread a blanket on the lawn and languidly stretched out for a sun bath.

Dragline's mouth hung wide open, his shovel forgotten in his hands. Koko kept up a pretense of working, hissing a warning to Drag.

"Watch it man. Boss Godfrey'll be on your ass."

"Fuck 'em all. Je—esus Christ! Would yuh look at that!"

"Careful Drag. You're gonna get chucked in the Gator as sure as hell, Eyeballin' that way."

"Fuck 'em, ah say. Let 'em put me in the Box if they want. Ah done found mah woman. Jes as soon as ah gits outta this here joint ah'm comin' back here and marry up wif her. You see if ah don't."

"I thought you were gonna marry Rita Hayworth."

"Ah can always commit bigamy, cain't ah? Like that guy Blackie? That's one thing ah wouldn't mind doin' Time for."

Then Boss Godfrey saw what it was that had paralyzed the squad. He walked down to the ditch bottom and leaned against a telephone pole standing next to the driveway, nervously swinging his Stick and glaring at us. But the shovels moved reluctantly. Even the guards were staring.

Then Boss Godfrey himself turned his head to look. As though they were all wired together, seventeen heads automatically turned with his in obedience to a single, universal thought. He looked back again. We looked at our shovels again. At the end of the line, Koko, Luke and Dragline stood motionless, brazenly violating the strictest rules of The Hard Road.

Then the girl reached behind her back and untied her brassiere strap. Lying on her stomach and propped up on her forearms, she pretended to read a movie magazine. Cursing violently, Dragline whipped away his Eyeballing glasses, threw them on the ground and jumped on them with wrath.

“Damn them things! They’re blockin’ the scenery.”

Luke muttered incoherently, his hands nervous on his shovel handle, Koko gazing with fixed enchantment, his shovel making ridiculous, meaningless motions in the sand.

“Drag! Look! She’s lookin’ down in between her tits!”

“Ah see. Ah see. Oh no — *no!* Now she’s scratchin’ her behind! Oh, Lawd! What are you doin’ up there? You tryin’ to kill me? Look! She’s *grinnin’* at me! She’s grinnin’ right at *me!*”

“What are you talkin’ about, Fat Boy? How do you know she’s not grinnin’ right at *me?*”

“Are you nuts? She knows a sure ‘nough he-man when she sees one. Now look. She’s sittin’ up and holdin’ the brassiere with one hand!”

“I got eyes. I can see.”

“Ah got eyes too. But they’re gonna drop out any minute now. Christ! One of the cups slipped down. Ah cain’t stand it no more! Ah’m creamin’ in mah jeans!”

“What a tease! What a no-good, god damn tease!”

“Don’t call mah fiancée a tease. You wanna git knocked on your silly lookin’ ass? Look. There she goes inside. Goodbye darlin’. Goodbye Lucille.”

“Lucille? How do you know her name’s Lucille?”

“A gal like that? With a ass and a pair of knockers like she’s got? She jest gotta be named Lucille. That’s all.”

Then it was over. The girl tired of her game, stood up and went back inside the house, her buttocks wriggling with one last, tantalizing twist. And the vision was gone.

We could hardly wait for Smoking Period so we could consult with each other, all of us wondering if it had been real or if we had all been bear-caught. We also wondered how many of us would have to spend a night or two in the Box.

That school girl had no idea of the extent of the power she wielded over us with the tyranny of her body. For weeks her detailed image remained in our memory. That very night the mere thought of her swinging hips sent all of us rolling over in our bunks to lay on our sides, surreptitiously playing with ourselves with sly, innocent movements.

With great care we tried to keep the double bunks from swaying and informing the man above or below us of our lust, writhing in shame at being compelled to make love to our own hard and calloused fists. Fretfully we grappled with the elusiveness of our fantasies as all around us other bunks were shuddering with an apparently source-less energy. Our souls coiled and uncoiled within us, wafting upwards in ethereal wisps to tangle with the unclean odors of shoes and sweat and the smell of shit coming from the johns.

Here and there could be heard that drawn-out sound. Not the growl and the whinnying triumph of masculine orgasm nor the quiet moan of satiated passions nor even a sigh of peace, but merely the lightest breathing, held in, checked, smothering a heart that was beating, spasmodic and muffled.

Then a strangled cry:

“Gettin’ up here, Carr!”

“Yeah. Aw right. Get up.”

The bulbs were still burning as incandescent suns orbiting through the pit of snores. Men turned over on creaking beds, the sheets tangled in leg chains. Softly Carr padded back and forth in his crepe soled shoes, his heavy face grim and brooding, chewing on another cigar, reliving every detail of the actions, the emotions and hopes that had led him to that heist job in Jacksonville which had doomed him to fifteen years of sleeplessness.

Outside in the darkness I could hear the hounds. And Big

Blue's baritone reached me as he howled at the full moon. I sat up in bed.

"Gittyap! Eeeaahh!"

I got up and wrapped the towel around my waist, walking barefooted to the toilets. The air was hot and thick with smells. Again I stared at the fly-specked cardboard sign tacked to the wall, reminding us forever of the Law.

Do not throw BUTS in URINOL. Anybody caught throwing buts in urinol and caught violating this order about buts will be put in BOX.

By order, Yard Man.

I went back to bed, relieved, exhausted, lying back and avoiding that wet spot near the edge of the mattress. I stared up at the ceiling and the flakes of old paint peeling off, at the bare light bulbs, at the mattress above me sagging down with the weight of another prisoner.

Again a voice: "Eiiiyyyyaaa! aaahhh!"

And I knew that it wasn't over yet, for any of us. There was still more hope and disappointment way out there in the Free World where the traffic still swished and roared along restless highways. There was more battle to be given and lost, rewards to be sought and forsaken, more loves to be wooed and unrequited.

And I knew that Carr's answer was for all of us, booming out in the Building and into the night, out among the fences, the guns and the stars — "Eeeaaahhh!"

12

AND THAT'S WHAT THOSE OTHER VOICES seemed to be saying today in the church yard as we had our beans. They were singing their gospel hymns with a grating energy, a song that expressed as much despair as it did of hope and put off the whole question of salvation, confining themselves solely to matters of style.

While they were singing Dragline was still telling the story to the Bull Gang. A group of men lay on their sides and on their bellies, their heads all pointing towards him, the spokes of a fabled wheel that spun backwards through time and space. Drag muttered and whispered, glancing every so often at Boss Godfrey who lay on the tarp without moving, his Walking Stick at his side, his glasses reflecting the pale gray and blue of the clouds and the sky.

"Ah'm tellin' yo'll now. That crazy Luke son of a bitch jes couldn't be beat. No how. He could work the hardest, eat the mostest, tell the biggest lies and sing the dirtiest songs. And fart? Man, it was like somethin' done crawled up his ass and died. When he farted he made your eyes water and your teeth rot. The grass didn't grow again for fifteen years at the place where he let go. These other guys, they couldn't never keep up with old Luke. All but me. Ah jes said, 'Sing it to me, sweet lips. Ah hear yuh talkin'.' On account of he was mah boy. Mah ass-hole buddy."

I listened to what Drag was saying as I filled my pipe again and lit it, reaching down to scratch the red bug bites on my ankle. Again I shut my eyes. Stupid Blondie was no longer sharpening yo-yos but the traffic roared by on the road as always. And the music continued; the piano, the trumpet and the banjo. Yes. There was no doubt about it.

Somewhere inside someone was playing a banjo. Just like the one that Luke always played.

His mother brought it with her when she came down to visit him one Sunday with his brother and his brother's eight-year-old son. They had written him in advance that they were coming, starting out before dawn and scheduling their three hundred mile trip so they would arrive just before visiting time at noon.

Luke was nervous Sunday morning. He hadn't seen his mother since he left Alabama several years before. She didn't even know about his being in trouble until after he had been sent to Raiford and then transferred to The Hard Road, when he finally wrote a letter home. So Luke paced the floor, his face shaven, his hair combed, his clean clothes for the week pulled and rubbed in an attempt to get some of the wash wrinkles out.

A group of men idled on the front porch, sitting or standing, motionless, looking out over the fence at the clay road and the orange groves, the clump of small live oak trees in front of the Captain's Office with the picnic table and the chairs set out in the shade underneath. It was hot and only the slightest breeze stirred the Spanish moss hanging in the live oaks. Boss Godfrey was the Walking Boss in charge of the Visitor's Park that weekend. Boss Smith sat in a chair about twenty feet away, his legs crossed, his hands discreetly folded over the pistol laying in his lap.

A new car came up the road, a well dressed woman getting out as the trustee opened the door for her and helped her take out the sack of groceries. The trustee brought the sack over to Boss Godfrey who casually poked around inside and then waved it away. Walking over to the gate, Boss Godfrey called out, "Steve!"

But Loudmouth Steve was inside the Building lying down on his bunk and reading a comic book.

The loiterers on the porch raised up a cry, “Hey Steve! Come on out! Your mother’s here!”

Quietly some of them swore to themselves,

“Damn punk. Gets a visit every week and don’t even care. Wish I had somebody out in the Free World to bring me stuff like he gets. Spoiled little prick. That’s all he is.”

Then Loudmouth Steve came out, pouting as he swaggered down the sidewalk, calling out to Boss Kean sitting on the gun platform at the corner of the fence, “Comin’ out here, Boss.”

“Yeah, Steve. Come on out.”

Boss Godfrey opened the gate and shut it behind him as Steve walked across the grass towards his mother, turning his face and offering his cheek as she advanced to kiss him. They sat down at the picnic table, Boss Godfrey sitting backwards on a chair about six feet away, his arms folded on top of the back rest.

A little later Curly’s wife and two kids drove up from Orlando where she had had a job and had rented a house for the previous three years in order to be near the same place Curly was. Then the parents of Little Greek arrived from Tarpon Springs. But it was another half hour before a late model pickup truck came up the road covered with mud and with dust of several colors. It stopped beside the other cars and then a boy and an old woman got out on one side and a man on the other side who went over and spoke to Boss Godfrey.

Luke waited on the porch until he was called and then marched down the sidewalk swiftly, his shoulders back and his head erect. His mother stood waiting, a thin woman in a plain cotton dress, her hair iron gray and swept up in a bun, her shoulders gaunt and stooped. Luke’s brother came forward, grinning, shaking his hand and leading him over to their mother. Then he stood aside waiting as they embraced each other. The old woman tried not to cry but

couldn't stop the flow of tears. Luke held her and patted her on the back until she could control herself and then the whole family moved to the table.

Inside the Building the radios were going full blast. Preacher had turned on some church hymns. Ears had turned on some jazz to drown him out. Others went back to their poker games and wallet making. But the rest of us stood on the porch and sat on the steps, smoking and watching and remembering how things used to be. Or better yet, as things should have been. With great interest we watched the picnic lunches being opened, the tidbits offered back and forth. We knew perfectly well that there wasn't a word being said about a man's Time, his guilt, his regrets or his felony. Except for the question of parole only the most ordinary kind of gossip was discussed. But we were fifty feet away and had to watch the melodrama of the afternoon as a silent pantomime. Except that later we heard about everything that had been said at Luke's part of the table, getting it practically word for word from Loudmouth Steve who sat next to them with his mother.

Luke ate the lunch his mother had brought along in a basket but he ate very slowly and with a sense of decorum. His young nephew sat beside his father twisting and craning his neck to see all he could of the guns and the stripes and the fences. Turning his head he looked directly into the eyes of Boss Godfrey who sat just behind them. Abruptly the boy turned his head back to the family.

Luke's brother tried to be cheerful, telling stories of the neighbors back home and telling a couple of the latest jokes he had picked up. Then he snuffled his nose and picked at his teeth with his thumb nail.

"I saw Helen the other day."

Luke looked down at his plate, took a strong bite out of the piece of chicken he was holding and said nothing.

“She’s got a fine lookin’ young ‘un. A boy.”

Luke said nothing. His brother said nothing. Struggling to find another subject he turned his head to look around. Then he saw Boss Godfrey sitting behind them, his old black hat pulled down low over his forehead, his eyes covered with the mirrored sunglasses, a cigar in his mouth, his arms folded motionlessly over the back of the chair.

His brother looked back at Luke, at his mother and then down at the ground.

“She says to say, Howdy.”

Again Luke took a bite out of his chicken.

Luke’s brother was wearing a suit, a white shirt and a tie. His hair was shiny with vaseline and plastered down smooth over his head. And even from the porch I could see that he was a farmer, as clearly as if he had been wearing overalls, brogans and a ragged old hat. You could see it in his hands, the weather-beaten complexion of his face, the awkward movements of his body. Jackson’s people were mountain people from that extreme northeast corner of Alabama which lies adjacent to Tennessee and Georgia, at the very end of the Appalachian Range. They were coal miners, timber cutters and livestock raisers who had always struggled without much luck to make a living out of a hard, tough country.

And I could see from there that Luke’s mother was the strong, enduring breed of woman that you find in those mountains. She was getting old and she was tired but she still had that expression of determination, of suffering long ago accepted without question.

Steve told us about it a few days later when Luke wasn’t around. Mrs. Jackson had been quiet, making sure that Luke got enough to eat but otherwise not saying much, just looking at him, ignoring the prison sights and sounds around her, ignoring Boss Godfrey’s eavesdropping and the pistol guard sitting nearby.

“It’s been a long time, Lloyd.”

“Yes maw,” said Luke.

“About three years now, ain’t it? Since the war was all done with?”

“I reckon it is.”

“Still drinkin’ like you were?”

“Aw, come on now, maw,” interrupted Luke’s brother. “You know Lloyd ain’t allowed no liquor in — while — he’s got to stay here.”

“I don’t mean that. He knows what I mean.”

“Yes maw. I know what you mean.”

“Have you been gettin’ any religion? I asked you once. Before you went into the army. Please Lloyd. Wherever you are and whatever you’re doin’, take a little time out once in a while for the Lord. Give him just a few minutes of your time.”

Luke said nothing. He reached for a piece of huckleberry pie and picked up a fork. But he stopped himself.

“Maw. You know — maw —”

They just looked at each other. Then Luke turned his eyes away.

“Lloyd. I know how you feel. But I do wish you could forget about your paw. That was a long time ago. You were only a little boy.”

Luke didn’t answer.

“He couldn’t help what he done. If I can find it in my heart to forgive him, why can’t you?”

Luke turned his head to the other side.

“Lloyd. He couldn’t help it.”

“He couldn’t? He was a preacher, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. But he was flesh and blood too.”

“He was, huh? But didn’t he decide to call himself a man

of the cloth? Didn't he teach the Good Word? Folks ain't supposed to steal? Ain't supposed to kill and lie and sin? Gotta work real hard and go to church and have lots of faith? Can't even drink or dance or play music? Just off. That's all. I guess he's still spreadin' the Faith somewheres ain't he? Among the poor innocent heathen, most likely."

"Lloyd. Please."

"I'm sorry, maw. I wish you hadn't mentioned it. You know I always get riled up."

The rest of the time was spent in idle talk. Some of the visitors in the park had nothing more to say at all. Curly played with his kids. The Greek just fidgeted, his parents holding hands and staring off to nowhere. Steve was anxious to get away and come back inside so he could peddle some of the groceries his mother brought him and get into the poker game.

Boss Godfrey stood up and looked at his watch. Without his saying anything, everyone knew. It was already time, the two hours were over. Last minute greetings and assurances and instructions and questions were exchanged. People kissed each other, kids were called, men shook hands.

Suddenly Luke's brother called his son and rushed over to the pickup truck, returning with a cardboard box full of Mason jars of preserved fruit and vegetables. The boy followed behind his father, grinning, holding out in his arms an old, scarred, scratched and beat-up banjo. Luke took it from him, holding it out at arm's length to examine it with smiling wonder.

There were the farewells, the last kisses and tears. The convicts gathered in front of the gate, clutching their parcels and sacks with one arm and waving with the other; short, embarrassed gestures, crippled by shyness and regret and pain. On the other side of the lawn the visitors began to get into their cars, turning to wave and blow kisses, the

kids screaming out their goodbyes.

Boss Godfrey walked over and opened the gate. The men came inside the yard and stood on the porch as the cars drove off down the clay road in single file, a horn blowing, arms sticking out of every window and waving.

One or two of the convicts made unconvincing waves, knowing they could no longer be recognized in the crowd of men standing on the porch dressed in the same gray prison clothes. Then they turned and went inside the Building to go to their bunks and inspect their packages. The rest of us stayed outside, trying hard to swallow down the lumps in our throats while pretending to be thinking of nothing at all.

After we recovered we went inside the Building to gather around Luke's bunk. Again we knew that something great was going to happen. There was a silent hush as we crowded around.

Luke sat on the floor cross-legged, his back to the wall. At first he just stared at the banjo in his lap, rubbing his hands over it, stroking its parts. In a low voice he began to mumble.

"Hell, I ain't played this thing since the day I got out of the army. Back in nineteen forty-five. Fort McPherson Georgia. Yeah, man. Took it home with me and put it up. Left it there when I took off and landed in Tampa. Never thought my kin folks would bring it down with 'em. Well, hell. Got lots of time. Might just as well play it a little while."

As it happened, Koko fancied himself as a guitar player, occasionally strumming out a few awkward chords on a beat-up guitar that he had bought for three dollars, an alligator wallet and twenty-four haircuts on the cuff from a man who was going home.

Then Dragline ran outside to fumble through his locker for the rusty harmonica he had found in a ditch one day,

coming back into the Building already huffing and puffing on it, his toothless gums and lips wrapped around it within the cup of his hands. Luke slowly ran his fingers over the strings, turning the pegs, the strings answering his touch with the strident yawps of chaos but then gradually allowing themselves to sweeten.

Slowly, very slowly, he began to pick out a few chords, stopping to flex his fingers and shake his hand from the wrist. Then he started. And once again we were far more than just amazed. Because Luke could play that thing. He was a master.

Koko's simple chords and Dragline's country-boy harmonica were nothing to what Luke could do to that banjo, his fingers beginning to loosen up, the memory of his former skills returning, fondling every chord with a certainty, a subtle strength and delicacy. Quickly he skipped from one thing to another, playing fragments of songs, picking out runs and scales, playing brief snatches of Dixieland jazz, spirituals and mountain hymns, long and complicated virtuoso pieces in the Blue Grass style.

Since the laws of silence were always enforced in the evenings by the Floorwalker, we could only hear Luke's music on the weekends. He would sit on the floor cross-legged by his bunk, his feet and his chest both bare, his eyes closed and his head tilted backwards, a tiny smile on his lips which were parted just enough to reveal the white of his teeth. And as Luke fondled those vibrant threads his face underwent a transformation, his hard and youthful handsomeness beginning to assume a glow. Slowly he became two selves, his hands undertaking a life of their own while the rest of him drifted away.

And he would sing, his voice droning as if inspired by some distant source, his flying fingers going on with their melody. Then he might repeat what he just said. Or make noises, throw in odd words which were not meant to be sentences but which kept up the syncopated rhythm of his

voice, half-talking in a mocking chant that alternated in pitch and intensity and became a kind of song, a kind of Talking Blues of a style and nature all his own.

For the first time we began to learn something of Luke's past. In little snatches we caught disconnected glimpses of his life. But when accompanied by the banjo it all made sense. He was never really performing nor was he telling a story. It was more like thinking aloud, explaining it all to himself.

"Come on you little fellas and gather around and your Uncle Luke will tell you all about the war. You remember the war. The big war. When everything went boom boom. And it also went — bang bang. And sometimes even — ka-zowie!"

"But just remember. You gotta play it cool."

"Course I had to kill a couple fellas here and there. Killin' was my job. And my daddy always used to tell me to do a real good job. Him bein' a preacher and all, carryin' the Word, I always did what my daddy said. Got to be pretty good at it. Got promoted. Got to be a corporal."

"But you gotta be cool. That's part of the job."

"Bein' a preacher's son and bein' one of the good guys I just naturally had to have me a lot of faith. A drink now and then didn't hurt none neither. Pretty tough fella. Pretty brave. Pretty good shot too."

"But better'n that. I was pretty damn cool."

"So the war went on and we went here and we went there. We'd walk awhile and we'd dig holes awhile. Then we'd walk a little more. Then we'd sit and we'd wait and they'd put us in some trucks and we'd wait. Then they'd drive us around and park a little bit. And we'd wait. But I never fretted like them other boys. Sooner or later ole Captain Luke would just hafta shoot. Or give up the gun. Besides. Preacher's son. One of the good guys. Strong and silent type. So I'd just play the banjo here and pick out

some new tunes. Just pickin' and pluckin' and playin' it real cool."

"Cause you gotta be cool. That's part of the job."

"After awhile we got tired of playin' soldier. So we went sailin'. We sailed to England. We sailed to Africa. We sailed to Sicily. But it seemed like no matter where we went folks kept shootin' at us. We kept tellin' 'em that we were the good guys. But they kept right on shootin'. Then we sailed to Italy. They took us out in this here big iron boat and put us in this little iron boat. And we kept sailin'. And they kept shootin'. And I sat up on top of a big old tank in this here landin' craft so's I could see what was goin' on. Get a good luck at all them bad guys. And them bad guys was mad. Shootin' guns all over the place. Things blowin' up. Water splashin'. Airplanes flyin' around. Everybody scared. So I played my banjo a little bit. And I sang to them boys. And I told 'em. I come from Alabama. Oh, yeah. With a banjo on my knee."

"And they saw me up there, pickin' away and not gittin' shot. And they figured things weren't so bad. So they perked up a little and weren't afraid no more."

"Cause you gotta be cool. That's all. Remain refrigerated."

"Later on the colonel he heard about how I could pick a banjo and all and he figures that's pretty hot stuff. So he give me this here extra medal that he didn't need. A star, he said. Bronze star. Like they make statues with."

Every weekend Luke would play and sing for us and we gathered round and listened. We listened carefully because we knew that this was the way it was, that when that banjo spoke to us, it was telling the truth.

And that old banjo had really been around. You could tell just by looking at it. It was a classic frontier model with a very long neck and four strings which Luke played in the same plectrum style that his family had for generations.

The head was made of split calf skin, the fret board inlaid with bits of colored wood and mother of pearl that formed the suits of a deck of cards — spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs. According to Luke it had been made by Bacon and Day sometime before the Civil War.

One of the lower frets had once been repaired with a wooden plug. But the back of the hole in the neck was still rough and splintered, the result of the same bullet that had made the long scar along Luke's left side and hip as he sat one morning in an olive grove a few kilometers north of Salerno. Luke sat on the porch steps one Sunday and told us the story just as he told us many others.

"So this here war went on and on. And the soldier business was really boomin'. Never seen so many bad guys. They were all over the place. In uniforms. In overalls. Even in dresses. Every time we took over a town the folks would come out with flowers and music. Everybody kissed everybody. Lots of real fine wine. Then this here committee would jump up. These would be the good guys who were hidin' out while the bad guys were around. Then they'd start draggin' these here collaborator people out of their houses. Got along good with the bad guys. So they lined 'em up by the courthouse wall. Preacher said a few words. And then bang bang. After that they hung 'em up by the feet. Everybody stood around and made fun of 'em hangin' there that-a-way. Upside down and all. Especially the women. Dresses hung clean down over their heads. Real dead too."

"After that the good guys were even again. Everybody had some more wine. Played some more music. Kissed everybody."

"But I kept pickin' and pluckin' and playin' it cool."

"Then we walked some more and dug some more holes. And waited. And shot guns. Houses got on fire. Guys got killed. People ran around with wagons and bicycles and

wheelbarrows. Everytime we set up a field kitchen a whole bunch of people would gather round with pots and tin cans. Especially kids. Lots of kids. We'd always leave a little bit in our mess kits and then call some kid over and dump it in his can. Took it home. Back to the hut or the cellar where his maw was. Sisters and brothers and all like that there."

"But one day this here new lieutenant he sees the commotion and he says, 'Sergeant, what's all the commotion?' And the sergeant said, 'Lieutenant sir, them is Eyetie kids what keep hangin' around for leftovers'. And the lieutenant sir, he says 'That will never do. Men gotta eat. Can't waste food on just kids that way. Obstructin' the war effort. Might even be sabotage. Besides, it ain't right that kids should eat garbage. Ain't sanitary.' So the lieutenant sir, he says, 'Sergeant, send three men to dig a nice sanitary hole for the garbage'."

"But the kids they all let out a howl when the left-over chow got dumped in the hole. Jumped right in after it. Little dirt didn't matter none to them. Had to stretch ropes around the hole. Push back the crowds. But the kids ducked under, slippin' and slidin' and floppin' around right in the mud. Screechin'. Cryin'. Raisin' all kinds of hell."

"So the lieutenant sir, he had the sergeant fill the hole up with dirt right away. Then the kids started diggin' up the dirt with their hands. So the lieutenant sir, he has the dirt tamped down hard and has it run over with trucks and then he posts a guard over it. Day and night. That learned them little kids all right. Little smart alecks. Ain't s'posed to eat dirty old slop that-a-way."

"The lieutenant sir, he just played it cool. Like you just gotta do."

So we learned about the war and we learned about Luke. We heard it as a song and a story, a jeremiad of pain and bitterness, a ragged tale made of scraps of memory, things seen and heard and half dreamed within the nightmare of

combat.

The banjo told us how it felt during the triumphal entry into Rome. The next weekend we heard about the artillery barrage and the shrapnel that put Luke in a base hospital for two months. Afterwards it was France and the mountains, the roads clogged with peasants riding in carts and wagons and automobiles pulled by oxen, carrying rucksacks, pedaling bicycles, all fleeing to the rear to escape the terrors of scorched earth that the Germans left behind.

But the banjo picked and plucked and reverberated through the monotony, the waiting, the hunger, the heat and the cold and the wet and the filth, the drunken revels and the jokes, the agonies and the horrors. Men were bombed and burned and butchered. Germans and Americans. Frenchmen, Englishmen and Italians. Civilians shot as hostages, as spies, as accidents. Children disemboweled. Women decapitated.

Luke began to join those who sought out the liquor in every captured village and farmhouse. When the sergeant led his squad into the overrun German dressing-station and pounced on the two nurses who had been left behind with the wounded, Luke took his turn in line. And when again a few weeks later they shot their way into a farmhouse and found three hysterical French girls amidst the wrecked furniture, the corpses, the empty shell cases and littered weapons, again Luke took his turn in line.

But he and the sergeant were the first of their division to enter into Germany. They crossed the bridge at a dead run, firing their M-1s from the hip at the demolition team that was frantically trying to light the fuses on the charges already put in place. Stumbling when they paused to ram another clip of ammo into the breech, running ahead, firing, screaming back at their own men who cowered and took cover, screaming curses at the fumbling Germans who fell, lit fuses, shot back and started running, the two of

them kicked explosives into the river, cut lashings, snatched out burning fuses and kept up a continuous, hysterical firing.

Running so fast and so recklessly that their speed alone kept them alive in the storm of answering fire, their battle fury making them insensitive to danger and pain, the sergeant not even knowing when his helmet was shot off his head, Luke thinking he had merely tripped when the bullet caught him in the leg and then jumping up and hobbling onward, following the sergeant straight towards the machine-gun nest at the bridgehead.

After ducking behind steel girders and picking off two of the gunners, they chased away the other two, jumped into the sandbagged position and turned the gun around, the sergeant feeding in the belts of ammunition until the third bazooka rocket exploded on the edge of the parapet and tore off the top of his head. Then Luke fired the gun alone, in a frenzy, trying to pin down the troops that were forming to counterattack and destroy the bridge, clearing a stoppage in the breach, opening a new can of ammo, shooting until there was no ammo left and then snatching up his rifle and using that.

The tanks saved him. The leader of the rumbling column opened up with its gun, the Germans falling back, Luke's own platoon coming out from cover, crossing the bridge and carrying him to the rear. Once again he was hospitalized. And once again he was decorated. But this time it was done during formal ceremonies, the presentation made by a lieutenant general with a band and a color guard. And this time the star was silver.

Again Luke was sent to the front, he himself a sergeant now and the squad leader. He still carried his banjo slung across his pack but he didn't have as much time for banjo picking. And he drank more and more.

Deeper into Germany they went. The war moved faster,

the chaos mounting into a climax of lust, confusion and destruction.

The concentration camps began to be liberated. The ovens were found. Germans began surrendering by units. Germans began fighting to the last man. German deserters were found hung from lamp posts bearing signs of disgrace on their chests. German boys became Werewolves.

Luke and his men rolled on, moving too fast to wash or shave, too fast to think or feel, demented by their conquest, their immortality. They carried bottles in their packs. They confiscated civilian cars and charged over pastures and fields like a squadron of mad cavalry pursuing the enemy in any direction, they cared not which.

Prisoners were fed. Prisoners were shot. Girls were given chocolate bars. Girls were raped. Orphans were given shelter. Homes were broken into and ransacked.

In a castle on a hill over a village by a river that none of them could name, having lost a fourth of their number in a ferocious fight that lasted for three days, Luke's company was quartered for a temporary rest. But they didn't want to rest.

With the tacit permission of the lieutenant who had taken command the day before when the Captain's jeep ran over an anti-tank mine that blew off both an arm and a leg, the company of soldiers began to loot the place in an orgy of vandalism.

Silver was taken, the contents of closets strewn open and trampled on. They shot down a painting of a high ranking officer, laughing hilariously when one of them urinated on it. They shot down chandeliers. Cabinets were smashed open and liqueurs guzzled. They slit open sofas with bayonets, broke windows, built up a fire in the fireplace and fed it with smashed furniture.

An old man came tottering in, yelling his protests until he was smashed in the mouth with a rifle butt. Hysterical

children were rounded up and locked in a room with an old nurse. Then the women were rounded up, the servants as well as the Countess and her family, all of them carried off kicking and screaming into various rooms to be stripped and mauled and ravaged over and over again.

Luke followed one of them up the curving stairway as she tried to escape the mob carousing in the hall below, screaming, giving the Nazi salute, cheering, bellowing their drunken laughter as Luke followed behind her, playing a hoe-down melody on his banjo. Trying to cover herself with the torn remains of her clothing she fled from floor to floor, screeching as the haunting strings pursued her with relentless purpose.

Reaching the top of the tower she locked herself in a room. But Luke followed, never missing a note, kicking the door open and entering the small dark cell fitted out with medieval furnishings.

The girl lay curled up in a heap on the floor, burying her face in her arms, refusing to look at the bewhiskered, muddy enemy soldier who stood in the doorway playing his fiendish instrument.

Then Luke stopped. High on the wall was a huge crucifix, the figure of Christ carved in the crude, macabre style of the Middle Ages, the wood dark and stained and splintered by the years, the face gaunt and tormented.

Luke stood there and looked at it. He looked down at the girl. He waited for a long time, hanging his head and thinking and quietly slung his banjo over his shoulder and left the room.

13

SO WE WORKED OUR WAY THROUGH THE spring, building our Time on The Hard Road. But music had come into our lives and we began our days with a new feeling, not at all afraid of the heat and the labor, the ant and the mosquito bites, the cramps and callouses. For Luke's music had taught us to understand the melody of the leg chains, the rhythm of the Floorwalker's feet, the wind of the passing traffic. And for once all was harmony. We knew that our yells to count off, to pour it out, to move on up or dig a hole were just part of a prolonged and complicated hymn.

Then the season began for using bush axes to clear away the underbrush from the Shit Ditches. A bush axe has a four-foot handle. At the end is an eighteen-inch blade, double-edged and with a hooked bill at the end. And with the bush axe Luke had found his natural instrument, wading through the chest-deep stagnant water and mud of the briars and vines, the palmettos, the weeds and the swamp willows, every stroke seeming to communicate a vibrant tremor of wild joy that went tingling up his arms and shoulders into his brain.

And that was a hot summer. We were always bear-caught, the axes moving by themselves as we stumbled blindly through the heat, somehow making it to the end of each day and then loading up into the truck, riding back to Camp with our heads drooping and our shoulders slumped, our legs kicking out from under the benches in convulsive spasms, our shoes and pants and bodies covered with muck.

But this was the kind of work that Luke liked best. The supple, long, hooked blade of his bush axe flashed as he

brought it down and around, forehand and backhand. The rest of us did what we had to do, working up to our belts in the putrid water, the mosquitoes and horse flies, swarming over us in great clouds as we swung our tools, slapped at the insects, floundered in the mire, sweated, swore, scratched and itched in our agony.

But Luke ignored the blisters and the scratches, the callouses and the heat as he lopped off the branches and fronds, jerking each fallen piece out of the way and wading farther into the tangled thicket, pirouetting, struggling, decapitating and trampling down those shadowed demons that rose up writhing all around him.

Invariably he took a stretch much longer than anyone else. Then he managed to finish first, eagerly climbing up the bank and swaggering down the road to the head of the line with long, rapid steps, his shoes and pants sloshing and dripping as he went.

Spinning the handle of his bush axe with a fast twist, the burnished metal of the blade sparkled in the sunlight. Exulting in his strength, he defied that sun and the sun-god alike, his voice booming out over the countryside,

“Movin’ up here, BOSS!”

But all the while Boss Godfrey was watching Luke. Some of us began to feel the Heat that was emanating from the smooth, anonymous mirrors of his sunglasses. But he gave no sign, until that day he stood on the edge of the pavement way ahead of the squad, one hand jingling the change in his pocket, the other leaning on his cane. Slowly we hacked and slashed our way towards him, that Shit Ditch running along the edge of a cypress swamp.

Drawling, barely raising his voice, he called out,

“Rabbit? Yo! Rabbit! Bring my rifle over here to me.”

Waiting for a car to pass, Rabbit then crossed the road to the cage truck, opened the door and dragged out the rifle lying on the floorboards. Again watching the traffic, Rabbit

crossed over and approached the Walking Boss, holding out the rifle horizontally, resting on the open palms of both hands.

Boss Godfrey took his Walking Stick and with a twisting, grinding motion he stuck it upright in the soft, wet ground. Then he lifted the rifle in his left hand, reaching in his hip pocket with his right. With practiced motions, the pieces making noises that sounded precise and well oiled, Boss Godfrey inserted the clip and the bolt assembly, pulled back the handle and rammed it forward again, a cartridge sliding forward into the breech.

With a smooth, diagonal sweep from over his left shoulder, Boss Godfrey brought the rifle down and around. Just that quick, he fired.

We heard the flat sound of the bullet ricocheting way off in the swamp. We stood and gawked, our ears ringing, smelling the burned powder.

Boss Godfrey pulled back the bolt handle, ejecting the shiny cartridge case which spun out and fell to the ground. As he took out the clip and bolt and put them back in his pocket, Boss Godfrey spoke to Rabbit standing there beside him.

“Go out yonder, behind that old log out there by the edge of the pond. Fetch me that turtle. And git Jim to cook it up for me at Bean Time.”

Reluctantly Rabbit clambered down the bank and into the Shit Ditch, shrinking from the touch of the water and the mud. Then he slipped and floundered and managed to climb the opposite bank. Pulling apart two strands of the barbed wire fence, he ducked his way through. At the edge of the pond he kept looking around for cottonmouths, testing his footing in the swampy ground. But he had to go on. He looked through the weeds near the dead tree that had fallen over into the pond and then gingerly started to wade out into the hyacinths.

Reaching down, he picked up the dead turtle by the tail, holding it up and yelling,

“I got him Boss! Deader ‘n a son of a bitch!”

Boss Godfrey paid no attention, standing there with the rifle over his shoulder at a lazy angle, perhaps watching every member of the squad and then again, perhaps not. Everyone kept on working, finishing his section, clambering out of the ditch to the shoulder of the road, moving around the Walking Boss and up to the head of the line, climbing back in again and chopping away.

As always, the next man ahead had left Luke an extra-long stretch which he was cutting down with fast, frantic strokes. As it happened I was working behind Luke so that when Rabbit got back to the road I was the last man at the end of the squad.

Rabbit stamped his feet, his pants wet and coated with black muck right up to his crotch. He handed the turtle to Jim who held it up with a grin. It was an alligator turtle, shot through the very center of the shell, a monstrous species of reptile with vicious, toothed jaws and an unbelievably large head.

Jim grinned again and pushed it towards Rabbit who jerked away. Then he picked up a stick and rapped it against the turtle’s nose. Although it was quite dead, the jaws opened by reflex, biting down on the stick and resisting when Jim tried to pull it out.

Boss Godfrey handed his rifle to Rabbit and he and Jim crossed the road towards the cage truck. Again Jim swung the turtle towards Rabbit who shrank back, complaining with a whine.

“Aw, come on. Quit, willya?”

I finished my strip and clumsily waded out of the mire, picking my way through the piles of cut bushes. Reaching high ground, I paused to rearrange my cap, slung my bush axe over my shoulder and began moving forward, water

sloshing out of my shoes with every step.

Luke had finished at the same time and reached the shoulder of the road just ahead of me. Boss Godfrey was standing a few feet away, lighting up a fresh cigar.

Suddenly Luke reached over and pulled Boss Godfrey's cane out of the ground, brazenly holding it out.

"Don't forget your Walking Stick, Boss."

I stopped right where I was, rooted to the ground. Boss Godfrey hesitated, holding the burning match, his sightless face turned directly towards Luke who stood there relaxed and easy, smiling as he looked into Boss Godfrey's glasses. I looked too. But all I could see was the reflection of the flames. Instinctively, I looked away and called out to the guards, loud and clear,

"Movin' on up here, *Boss!*"

"Yeah, Sailor. Move on up."

I stepped out on the road and moved in a circle around the two of them, discreetly turning my head to look but only when I was well on the other side. Luke still stood there, smiling, holding the cane in one hand, the bush axe in the other. But Boss Godfrey continued to light his cigar, puffing on it several times, blowing out the smoke, then putting the flame to the tip once again. Satisfied, he tossed away the match and put the box in his shirt pocket. He shifted the cigar in his mouth, licking the side of it twice and then replacing it. Without a word, he reached out and took the Walking Stick from Luke's hand, putting the end on the edge of the road, shifting his weight and leaning on it. Luke called out to the guards and moved forward, his shoes slurping and clumping behind me.

I went back to work, not daring to ogle or show any signs of wonder at the phenomenal event I had just witnessed. I kept my eyes on the ground. I cut bushes and said nothing.

It was nearly Bean Time. Jim and Rabbit moved the two

trucks to a dry spot a few blocks up the road and got things ready. With his pocket knife and with an axe from the tool truck, Jim cut the bottom of the alligator turtle's shell and dressed out the meat. Sticking the chunks on a green branch, he began to cook it over the fire that Rabbit had built, preparing it for the Free Man's dinner.

The Bull Gang was quiet as we ate our beans. Working in a Shit Ditch was a demoralizing job and despite the heat we were waterlogged and chilled, slimy and disgusted.

Once in a while a man would stand up to get the file and begin sharpening his bush axe. But the rest of us just sat, lay back on our jackets, stared up at the sky and smoked.

Onion Head and Stupid Blondie stacked up the bean plates in the box and put away the corn bread and molasses. Then Onion Head went over to the remains of the turtle's carcass, squatting down to poke at the shell and the intestines with a stick and then nudging the severed head through the grass.

"Look! Look at that son of a bitch! Lookee here!"

Again the turtle's mouth had opened, the big eyes staring as slowly the jaws began to shut, clamping down hard. Onion Head raised up the stick, looking at the ferocious head which clung to it, blood still dripping from the severed neck.

Cool Hand Luke lay on the ground leaning on one elbow. He looked over and muttered half aloud.

"Bite it brother. Bite hard. Real hard."

Then the stick cracked and broke, the turtle's head falling to the ground.

We went back to work. But for the rest of the day I tried to stay away from Luke. He scared me. I didn't like his carelessness, his sense of humor or his sacrilege.

But a few days later I found myself once again working just behind him and over to his right. We were sent out to

the Rattlesnake Road, right out there where we were this morning. And again we were yo-yoing, working in an echelon formation.

It was a damp and foggy morning. About two hours after we started working we came to a patch of swamp, the ditch filled with marsh grass, the water just deep enough to reach our ankles. Rhythmically we swung our tools back and forth, our feet cold, our shoes heavy and slimy, our thoughts dim and far away.

Luke stopped in mid-stroke and quickly jabbed his tool into the water, holding the blade of his yo-yo down on the head of a rattlesnake whose long yellow and brown body rose to the surface not six feet in front of me, thrashing wildly. I leaped back, nearly getting hit by the yo-yo swinging behind me. But Luke just stood there. Grinning, he called out to Boss Paul — "Pickin' it up here, *Boss!*"

Boss Paul didn't answer, just standing with his shotgun under the crook of his arm and smiling. Luke reached down, grabbed the snake by the tail and picked it up as cool as you please, holding it a long moment as it twisted and curled. Swinging it gently back and forth, he called out to Rabbit who was coming up the road with his water bucket.

"Hey, Rabbit! Catch!"

Luke tossed the snake up on the shoulder, spinning it towards Rabbit who dropped his bucket, let out a screech and ran across the road towards Boss Godfrey who stood there in front of the truck without moving, one hand in his pocket rattling his change, the other hand leaning on his Walking Stick.

And I will always remember Luke the way he looked that foggy morning: lazily holding a deadly serpent in his hand, its jaws agape and hissing as it twisted and knotted and struck at the dim and hazy sun. For that was an exact portrait of the man named Cool Hand Luke.

14

THAT SATURDAY MORNING LUKE TOOK OUT his banjo right after breakfast and began playing a tune. I lay on my bunk, listening in wonder to the way he could carry two different melodies at the same time. I could never understand how so many different sounds could come from only four strings. But there was something magical in everything Luke did. And if he had been just another ordinary convict I wouldn't have said anything. But I liked Luke. I had to warn him.

"Luke? Listen. It's none of my business what you do. But I've been chain ganging a long time and I'd just like to tip you off. That was a bad thing you did the other day. Picking up the Man's cane like that. Hell. You might just as well walk up to him, grab him by the balls and pull."

But Luke just smiled and closed his eyes, his fingers flying on in a tinkling blur.

"Yeah, Sailor. You're right."

"Why don't you take it easy a little bit. You don't have much Time to do. Hell, you'll be out of here before you know it."

"Take it easy? Why, Sailor. I'm surprised at you. You know damn well I always play it real cool."

I gave up. There was no talking to Luke. He was what he was. But there were others who could see what I saw. Even Dragline grew more and more anxious out on the Road, noticeably reluctant to work with him, growing quiet and sullen, concentrating on his work. Today in the church yard, Dragline expressed those same feelings to the Bull Gang as he was telling us his version of the story:

“Ah’m tellin’ yuh. He had the devil in him. Sometimes ah think he wa’n’t even human. Way he could play that fuckin’ banjo now. Ah mean, playin’ is one thing. Any old ass hole can play. But he didn’t play. He didn’t even have to touch the strings. Just tickled ‘em a little bit while he was thinkin’ of somethin’ else. No suh. It was the devil that did the playin’. Him and Luke must have made some kind of a deal somewhere along the line. Ah don’t know what. Thar’s no tellin’. But ah knows this. Luke was mad at God. Yeah, he was. He was just natcherly mad at him. Crazy, that’s what. Just plain crazy. Got shot up too many times. Ah mean he wasn’t really mean or ornery or nothin’. He was a sinner ah reckon, yeah. But not what you’d call — you know what ah mean. Mad at God? Hell, that’s for Judases and Jonahs and Romans and guys like that there.”

After the weekend we went back out on the Road again. And we were put into a Shit Ditch again. The morning passed as we gripped the sweaty, slippery handles of our bush axes, swearing under our breaths, fighting the horse flies and the mosquitoes, slashing away at the tangled underbrush. In the afternoon a thunder storm began to approach over the horizon, pushing a pocket of hot, humid air before it.

The storm drew closer, lightning flashing on the horizon, thunder banging and exploding. Ugly clouds ruffled towards us, the wind suddenly picking up force and blowing its hot breath over our bodies. Luke paused and looked up at the storm, smiling at it with some secret amusement.

Stabbing his bush axe into the water and mud so it stood up vertically, he called out to the nearest guard — “Wipin’ it off here, Boss!”

Taking off his cap, he wiped his face with it, rubbing the sweat out of his eyes. Then he put it back on his head, pulling the bill down and over at a cocky angle. Again the thunder banged and echoed within the deep hollowness of

a cloud. Again Luke glanced up at the sky and smiled. Dragline was just ahead of him, finishing up his sector. Luke called out, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Hey Dragline! It looks like old man God’s ves!’ ready to take himself a piss!”

Dragline was just getting ready to swing. Aimlessly he let the bush axe flop over to one side. Looking up at the sky, he turned his head and answered out of the corner of his mouth.

“Damn, Luke! Dummy up. Are you done gone nuts? You cain’t talk that a-way about the Lord.”

“Aw, come on, Dragline. You mean to tell me you still believe in that bearded son of a bitch up there?”

Dragline’s mouth fell open. He looked up and then down and then all around him. He took a few aimless swings with his bush axe, doing nothing but splash water and chop up pieces of felled vegetation.

“Man — listen. Don’t talk like that. Especially like now when it’s lightnin’ the way it is. You’re liable to git struck down. God’s liable to git real mad and strike you dead. Jes like that. Don’t you know that you’re bein’ one of them blasphemer guys? Ain’t you scared?”

Luke smiled and shook his head, cut down a water oak sapling and then gripped his bush axe with both hands spread apart, the handle resting horizontally against his thighs.

“Oh, my poor, baby Dragline. If there’s really a God like you say then he can strike me dead right now. Right? OK. then. Let him. Let him prove it. Right now.”

“Luke. Ain’t you scared? Ain’t you scared of dyin’ and goin’ to hell?”

“Dyin’? Ha! It’s livin’ I’m scared of. Livin’ this nice pretty life you say the Old Man up there can take back whenever he wants. Well, he’s welcome to it. Come on God! Show

your stuff, Old Timer! Make me know it! Make me know you're up there!"

Grumbling, the clouds boiled into masses of black and gray billows, thunder volleying into a crescendo of noise, three distant explosions banging one after the other followed by a brilliant flash of lightning crackling over the sky from horizon to horizon. The wind picked up force. Suddenly the air became cold as the first patter of rain began.

Dragline cringed and shrank away from Luke. Desperately he lashed out at the few remaining bushes and began wading frantically through the ditch until he reached the shoulder and clambered up to the road.

"Gittin' up here, Boss Paul! That crazy Luke says he don't believe in no God. Ah ain't gonna work next to no blasphemer! Ah don't wanna git struck by no lightnin'. Ah may be a sinner aw right. Yeah, But ah *believes.* Ah damn sure *believes!*"

Boss Paul just stood there, his shotgun cradled under his left arm, smiling down at Luke who was slashing away at the bushes in his berserk manner, cutting left and right in a fury of labor.

It began to rain. Boss Godfrey signaled to the men at the head of the line to load up into the cage truck. As each man finished his strip he clambered out of the ditch, went down to where the truck was parked and got in. Boss Godfrey leaned one hand on the bars beside the open door, holding his cane in the other.

Dragline walked along the edge of the road, looking back over his shoulder, his face full of fear as the lightning cracked and hammered down on the countryside. But Luke was laughing out loud, pausing in his work to turn his face up into the downpour, paying no attention to the rules or the Law, unafraid of the Walking Boss or of the guards, undaunted by their weapons or their deities.

“Hey Drag? Where’s that thunderbolt Drag? Where is that big, bad God of yours? That god of power and wrath and vengeance? Or is he a God of love? I forget now Dragline. Which is it, anyway?”

Luke raised his bush axe high. From out of the slimy water towards the sky there rose a stiff continuity of striped pants and muscled, sunburned body, his hands tightly gripping the long handle of the bush axe which extended straight above his head to the sharp, curved blade that glinted there in the storm between heaven and earth.

Then it fell with a whack. Left and right it rose and fell again, his arms knotting and bending and flexing as Luke cut a swath through the tangled thicket that clogged the channel of mud. It thundered and the lightning cracked as the pulsing movements of Luke’s arms and shoulders answered with the ultimate twitch of life.

When he finished his strip he climbed up to the road. He was the last man, the rest of us already loaded up. Smiling in his own secret way, he walked down the road to the tool truck and passed up his bush axe to Rabbit who was shivering impatiently in the rain. Then he walked towards the door in the cage that yawned open, ready to swallow him down as it had already swallowed the rest of us.

Beside that gaping hole stood Boss Godfrey leaning against the bars. His face was turned towards the sky, his mirrored glasses reflecting the dark gray clouds of the storm as the lightning beat down on the earth in swift, punishing strokes like the terrible Walking Stick of the man with no eyes.

15

AGAIN, THE WEEKEND ROLLED AROUND. That Sunday, about eleven in the morning, the Yard Man opened the gate and came into the Building, walking with that slumped shoulder way of his, his back bent, his chest caved in, his head lowered. On the porch he paused to look up at Gator from under his eyebrows and over his glasses, his false teeth clicking and moving from side to side in his jaws.

"Where's Luke?"

"He's inside, Boss. Playin' poker."

The Yard Man went inside. Rabbit was dealing, Luke and a few others picking up their cards and studying their developing hand. Everyone else glanced up at the Yard Man as he stood there by the table. But not Luke. He was whistling a tuneless rhythm through his teeth, idly rearranging the cards in his hand.

Without a word, the Yard Man dropped a telegram on the blanket, turned and shuffled away.

Luke looked at the telegram which had already been opened and read. He stared at it, threw in his cards, got up and went to his bunk. A few minutes later we heard Luke's banjo. He was playing very softly, picking out the slow melody of an old hymn on one string.

Koko found out what was the matter. He went over to Luke's bunk and found him sitting on the floor, his bare feet tucked up beneath his drawn-up legs. He picked at his banjo, tears streaming down his face and over his bare chest. Koko looked at the telegram lying there on the floor. Luke's mother had died early that morning from a sudden heart attack.

For the rest of the day the Building was hushed. Radios were turned low, voices were subdued. There was no horseplay, no yelling, no laughter. Luke was left alone to brood by himself, the rest of us knowing what it was like to be on the inside while our families celebrated and suffered, struggled and mourned without us. Luke could send no flowers, pay no homage, convey no sense of his presence to the rest of his family.

All afternoon he sat on the ground behind the Building, seeking what little privacy he could get, slowly picking out that same church hymn on the same single string.

Boss Kean was on duty that weekend, stationed on the rear gun platform beside the laundry shed just outside the corner of the fence. He sat there with his legs crossed, the double-barreled shotgun across his lap, chewing his quid as he stared at Luke with a frown.

When the new week began on Monday the whole Bull Gang was tense and anxious. Everyone moved with a clumsy and hopeless concentration on his work. At Smoking Period everyone sat or lay on the slope of the ditch, looked down at the ground, sifted sand through his fingers or played with twigs. We were actually relieved when it was time to go back to work, feeling better with our tools in our hands.

Boss Godfrey walked slowly up and down the road, idly swinging his Walking Stick with the handle hooked over one finger. At the far end of the line he would pause, swing his Stick at a piece of trash or a clump of dirt and then slowly begin sauntering back again.

At the end of the day when we unloaded and lined up on the sidewalk to be shaken down we could see that the light bulb over the open door to the Box was burning. And there was a night shirt draped over the top of the latticework screen.

Desperately we searched our souls. Who was it going to

be? Had we Eyeballed? Were we guilty of Loudtalking? Did we leave a butt or a match on the floor by our bunk or turn in the top sheet for weekly washing instead of the bottom one?

The last ones to be put in the Cooler were Loudmouth Steve and Cottontop for bickering and arguing and finally fighting out on the road. The one before that was Ugly Red who found a bottle in a ditch with an inch of whiskey in the bottom. A guard spotted him as he tried to sneak a quick drink while squatting on his knees and pretending to take a piss. But since then there had been no fights, no arguments, no broken tool handles. We were unaware of any plots.

One by one the Walking Boss shook us down. I could hear the man next to me let out his breath as he lowered his arms, turned around and began taking the things out of his cap and putting them back in his pockets. Then the Walking Boss was poking through my own cap as I held it up. Slowly I felt his hands rub along my upraised arms, down my sides, slap at my pockets, run down both sides of my left leg and then my right leg. A second's pause. A tap on the right shoulder. Then I too let out my breath and relaxed, immediately feeling righteous and wondering who had been the naughty one, the poor, mischievous bastard who had to suffer for his sins.

The Captain and the Yard Man stood about twenty feet behind us, waiting and saying nothing. Behind them stood Boss Shorty with his pump repeater. One of the trustees was busy putting a gallon of water and a chamber pot inside the Box.

But Boss Godfrey continued down the line until the whole squad had been shaken down. Again we held our breaths, our stomachs tightening. Slowly Boss Godfrey strolled towards the Captain who took a drag on his cigarette and spit three times.

With a faint growl, Boss Godfrey spoke.

"Luke. Fall out."

He knew what he had to do. Without a word he stepped out of line and walked along the fence down to the Box, pulling his shirt and jacket off as he went. Stepping behind the latticework screen he took off his pants and shoes, the Trustee taking away all his clothes as he slipped the old-fashioned night shirt over his head. Luke knew better than to ask any questions. Nor did he expect any explanations.

He stepped inside the Box. The Yard Man slammed the door and padlocked it. The Trustee slid the heavy bar in place.

Shuffling back to the gate, the Yard Man swung it open, his false teeth clicking as we counted through. Everything went on as usual. There was nothing for anyone to do or say. There were no questions to ask. For we all knew that Luke had been put in the Box because he might try to escape in order to attend his mother's funeral.

That night, when any of us got up to use the john, we took a quick peek through the bars and the screens on the windows before lying down again. Outside, the light was burning.

We all knew about the Box. We knew what Luke was feeling as he lay there on the rough wooden floor, shivering in the cold night air, slapping at the mosquitoes that swarmed in, attracted by the light outside the grating. We knew that he was stiff and cramped and unable to sleep. He was tired and dirty from his day on the Road. He was hungry and wanted a smoke.

But we still didn't know Luke. We didn't know him at all.

One of the cooks told us what happened. Early the next morning, before the First Bell, the Yard Man went out with the cook and a guard and opened the Box in order to give Luke a few catheads, to dump his slop bucket and give him some fresh water. But when the door was unlocked and

swung back, they saw Luke lying there fast asleep, his head towards the door.

The Yard Man flew into a rage and began kicking Luke in the face.

“You son of a bitch! Stand up! Stand up when I come in! You hear me? Stand up back there like you’re s’posed to!”

Luke sprang to his feet, shaking his head, groping for the wall of the Box, blood trickling from a cut on his lip and streaming down the front of his night shirt. Swaying and blinking his eyes, he stood there, the Yard Man scowling at him, his false teeth moving back and forth and clicking in his jaws. Without a word, he slammed the door shut and locked it.

All that day Luke was left in the Box as we went out on the Road. After work we came back in, ate our supper, showered and went to bed. All night the bulb was still burning on the front of the Box.

Wednesday morning the Yard Man went out with a trustee and a guard. When they swung back the door they found Luke standing at the rear of the Box, his arms folded across his chest. The Yard Man started to grin but Luke cut him short with a growl —

“Shut the god damn door, Boss. You’re lettin’ in a draft.”

The Yard Man didn’t move. He just stood there looking at Luke from under his eyebrows. Then his false teeth started clicking again and he slammed the door as hard as he could.

We went to work that day and also the next. Still the bulb burned on the front of the Box.

The morning after that the Yard Man opened up the Box, Boss Kean standing behind him with his shotgun aimed right at Luke’s belly, one eye squinted tight, the double muzzles wobbling and jerking as the old man quivered, trying to concentrate and chew his plug of Red Mule at the

same time.

Luke was standing at the rear of the Box, his arms crossed over his chest in exactly the same posture as they had left him two days before. Except that his eyes weren't quite right and his face was dirty and bearded.

Rudolph, the bloodhound puppy which the guards used for a pet was running all around, his long ears flopping loosely, barking and crouching, sniffing at Boss Kean's heels while he tried to kick him away without losing his aim or his chew. The Yard Man grinned. In his hand he held a single, heavy biscuit. He tossed it up and down, weighing it in the palm of his hand.

"You hongry Luke? How 'bout a nice, hot cathead? Big eater like you must be hongry. Been four days. Ah reckon this would taste mighty good right about now. But damn. Wait a minute. Little ole Rudolph here looks pretty hongry too. Cain't mistreat a pore, innercent hound that a-way. Tell you what. Why don't we split it with the pooch? OK?"

The Yard Man grinned and broke the biscuit in half. He held one piece in his left hand. He held the other up over Rudolph as he barked and wagged his tail, sat on his haunches and gazed up at the tempting tid bit.

"Come on, Rudolph. Speak to me, baby. Come on now. Be good. Speak to me. Speak! Speak!"

Rudolph barked, turned his head and gazed sideways up at the biscuit. Then he stood up as the Yard Man fed it to him, eagerly gulping it down as he was patted on the ribs with hollow slaps.

The Yard Man turned to Luke.

"Well, Luke. Here's your piece. Better eat it slow. There won't be no more till tomorrow."

Squinting his eyes into narrow, concentrated slits, Luke growled in a low, even voice.

"Might as well give Rudolph the other half too, Boss. I

just ain't much hungry."

The Yard Man pushed the side of his lower plate deeply into his left cheek.

"Gawd damn you! Ah'll fix yore fuckin' ass! But good! Rudolph! Here. Here, boy. Boss Kean? You watch this man close. He's a trouble maker and has been known to be plannin' escape attempts. If he tries anything a-tall, you know the Law."

Furiously, the Yard Man slumped away towards the Captain's Office, his shoulders hunched forward, his head down. In five minutes he came back with an aluminum bowl of Epsom salts. He stood a minute looking at Luke, his dried and wrinkled face grimaced into a mask.

"Drink this, bastard. And don't tell me you ain't thirsty. Ah know you're thirsty. And Boss Kean here knows you're thirsty too."

Luke drank the salts straight down with no expression at all and handed back the bowl. Then they locked the Box again. For three more days.

The rest of us went on with our routines. That was a Friday. That morning we went out on the Road and made the day but the weekend passed with tense expectation. We did the usual things but there was a difference, an atmosphere of sullen helplessness hanging over the Camp. Nothing was ever said about Luke. Not out loud. But we were all thinking the same thing.

And about the Box what is there to say? During the day the sun beats down on the metal roof. You try to entertain yourself with thoughts, with attempts to decipher the meanings of the sounds outside — the squeaks and bangs, doors slamming, voices, the movement of trucks. At intervals you drink from the can of water. Occasionally you will chin yourself up and gaze through the narrow grating at the top of the wall for a quick peek outside. Several times a day the laxatives will force you to sit on the

chamber pot, the hot, close air overwhelming you with the stench of your own guts.

At night you lie on your back, trying to concentrate on anything at all that will take your thoughts away from the cramps in your belly, lying there at the bottom of a black pit, the dimensions of which are exactly those of a grave. The grating above you is shining from the light of the bulb outside, the chain link mesh just as silvery and delicate as the web of a spider.

You lie there and shiver and listen to the whine of the insects. Monstrous waves begin to surge in and out, drowning you with every change of the tide. Spouts of sand drift in from no matter where, choking you in the hourglass of time of which you are in the expended portion.

On Monday morning, just before the First Bell, we heard the door to the Building being unlocked. Carr and the Wicker Man opened and closed the gate to the Chute and there was Luke, standing in his night shirt with his shoes and his clothes in his arms and with a week's growth of whiskers on his face.

After allowing him to go into the Messhall and have breakfast they took him back into the Building for a one day Lay-in. The Yard Man and a trustee went through the same procedure as for any convict who is too sick to go out on the Road. Except that they didn't give Luke the usual prescription of two Brown Bombers and a bowl of hot Epsom salts. Moving his bunk next to the toilets within reach of the water faucet, they padlocked a ten-foot chain around his ankle. The other end was padlocked to the frame of his bunk. During the day the trustees brought him some beans and corn bread and when we returned that night he had already been unchained. He ate supper with us in the Messhall and later he shaved and took a bath and fell into bed.

On Tuesday he went out on the Road, stiffly clambering

into the truck with the rest of us, sitting on the bench in his usual place and silently smoking as much as he could. When we reached the job and the cage was unlocked he climbed out of the truck with difficulty, limping a little bit as he went over to the tool truck and got his shovel from Jim. For the rest of the day Luke took it easy. He was weak and his old wounds were bothering him. He did just enough work to keep up with the slowest man, conserving what strength he had left.

And all day Boss Godfrey stood on the shoulder of the road, leaning on his Walking Stick, staring down at Luke laboring in the bottom of the ditch. When he moved up Boss Godfrey strolled along with him, resuming his pose as Luke went back to work.

That night Luke ate a light supper. We knew that his stomach had shrunk and that he was more tired than he was hungry. After taking a shower he went straight to his bunk, falling asleep immediately.

The next morning he was slow in getting up and getting dressed, moving with great effort. He was the last one to come out of the Messhall and join the huddled groups standing near the porch, their cigarettes glowing in the darkness and making fast red arcs to hesitate and brighten and reveal a face isolated amid the dark forms.

We went through the procedure of lining up and being counted by the Yard Man, counting off out loud as we went through the gate. The spotlights revealed the morning scene of trucks, guards and walking bosses. We stood there half asleep, listening to the barking of the dogs. The Captain took a long drag on his butt and began spitting dryly through pursed lips.

“Aw right, Boss. Move’em out.”

We began counting off by twos, loading up into the cage truck, Cool Hand Luke bringing up the rear. Boss Godfrey held the edge of the gate with one hand as we scrambled

inside and took our places. Luke raised his foot to mount the steps, hesitated and reached for the edge of the door. Painfully he pulled himself up to the first step. But he was too slow. We could see the Captain watching. And Boss Godfrey also knew that the Captain was watching. For in the complex hierarchy of the Chain Gang every boss has another boss, the purely eternal rising on high right up through the Captain and even beyond until it ultimately reaches the Great White Father himself, who reigns supreme in Tallahassee.

Boss Godfrey lashed out with a high kick, his foot catching Luke on the upper part of his thigh. Swiftly the Walking Stick landed three times on his shoulders and back with loud whacking noises, Luke's shoes banging and scraping on the steps as he struggled to climb inside.

But instead of moving forward and taking his place Cool Hand turned around in the doorway and stared down at Boss Godfrey, looking directly into the shining silver of his anonymous eyes with an expression of defiance.

Boss Godfrey threw a punch right at Luke's belly which he barely avoided by stepping back. Boss Godfrey reached in his hip pocket for his blackjack and mounted the steps. Inside the truck there was pandemonium. Again and again the Walking Boss swung his blackjack. There was a wild scramble of arms and legs, scraping feet and rattling chains, a melee of struggling bodies as all of us tried desperately to get out of the way. Luke fell to the floor and rolled away, trying to crawl under the bench and cover his head with his arms to ward off the blows. Boss Godfrey kicked and punched, his big body hampered by the closeness of the cage and the crush of bodies, panting as he cursed at Luke,

"Damn you smart ass bastard! Who the fuck do you think you are? Showin' your ass around here? Huh? Ah'll teach you some gawd damn respect. Right now."

Luke ended up under one of the benches, his face to the

wall, Boss Godfrey giving him one or two final kicks before stamping out of the cage and down the steps, slamming the gate shut and locking it, leaping into the cab and roaring away.

16

BUT BY THE TIME THE FOURTH OF JULY came around everything had settled down. Boss Godfrey didn't have such a hard-on for Luke anymore and gradually the Heat began to cool off. He did his work and ate his beans. He shot the bull, cracked jokes and played the Dozens. Every night he sat up and played poker and on Saturday morning he took out his banjo, tuning up the strings and starting the weekend by flailing out a vigorous Lonesome Road melody.

In the Chain Gang the Fourth of July has always been the big holiday of the year. Perhaps the idea is to instill in all of us a burning love of country. And hence a love for law and order. In any case, Independence Day is a very big deal. Nobody worked. Jabo the Cook mixed up twenty-five gallons of lemonade in a big wooden barrel and had two trustees carry it into the Building. In the afternoon a truck came back from town with a load of watermelons and they issued out a half-melon to every man in Camp.

It was a Glorious Fourth all right. All day long the radios blasted away. We boxed and wrestled and played Grab Ass, four Chain Men jitterbugging in the middle of the floor, stamping their feet, leaping and twirling, their shackles jingling and tinkling away in frantic celebration.

After supper we checked into the Building in the usual manner but instead of the eight o'clock bell that would have ordinarily sent us all to bed in absolute silence, we were allowed to stay up until midnight and make all the noise we wanted.

Each of the four radios was tuned to a different station, hillbilly music wailing and screeching at full volume. At the same time the Terrible Trio was hard at work, Luke's banjo,

Koko's old, beat-up guitar and Dragline's harmonica all going at once, banging out a melody all their very own. The Family seemed to have a preference for the live orchestra and gradually men began to gather in a tight knot in the space between the two double bunks where Luke and Koko slept.

They stood shoulder to shoulder around an inner ring of men who sat on the floor, the entire congregation stamping their feet, clapping their hands and singing their lungs out.

Sleep was out of the question. So was reading. I finally gave up and went over to the barrel and with a dipper I filled up a Pepsi Cola bottle with lemonade. Shuffling barefooted towards the hootenanny, I stepped aside to avoid the ponderous bulk of the Floorwalker as he went swaggering by, his massive shoulders rolling from side to side, his cigar going, his eyes sharp as he scowled at his evening charges. Up and down the Building he paced away the hours, Carr, the Floorwalker; half-convict and half-Free Man, as stem and mighty as the Colossus of Rhodes, straddling the fence of crime while we ordinary vessels sailed in and out between his legs.

I went over to the celebrating crowd, taking a long swallow of lemonade and looking over Little Greek's shoulder at the orchestra within the inner circle. And there stood Cool Hand Luke in the very epicenter of it all, bare-chested, his banjo going hell bent for election, his eyes closed, that secret smile carved into his lips.

And there was Society Red, down on his hands and knees, working away with a rusty hacksaw blade on the hole he was cutting through the floor.

I joined the chorus, not knowing the words but just letting some kind of noise come out. Desperately I tried to catch somebody's eye, but everyone was industriously beating out the rhythm of the song, the disarrayed blankets of the lower bunks pulled down and touching the floor, the

solid wall of muscled brown skin blocking the view of the Wicker Man and the Floorwalker.

So I wet my throat with lemonade and I stomped my foot and sang. Whenever the broken piece of hacksaw blade hit a nail the screech made my hair stand on end. But there was always a spontaneous chord on the musical instruments played just a little off-key, everyone's voice strident and loud, our faces red with effort.

"Oh, they say you are leaving this valleeeee —"

"We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smiii—iiiile —"

Back and forth paced Carr, the floor of the Building trembling with his weight. And the Wicker Man began to add to the din by working on the silver ring he was making, beating on the rim of a quarter with the back of a tablespoon. One by one the radios would pause for a commercial but we went on with our songs —

"If I had the wings of an angel —"

"Over these prison walls I would fly-y-y-y-y —"

Then the Wicker Man stopped tapping with his spoon, pulled out his watch and looked at it, ponderously rose to his feet and opened the switch that shut off all the radios. He shuffled out on the porch, took down the iron bar from the top of one of the rafters and hit the old brake drum that hangs suspended from a wire.

Abruptly we finished our singing, our voices tapering off in ragged confusion as the final words ended in a mumble of innocence —

"— g'wine to run all night, g'wine to run all day —"

There was a last tinkle of banjo notes and we were through, Carr plowing through the middle of the dispersing crowd, growling out of the corner of his mouth,

"First Bell. Let's get to bed. You done had your fun."

Men scurried from bunk to bunk to borrow books and tobacco from each other. There was the last minute rush to

the toilets. Shoes clumped on the floor.

The movement subsided. Everyone was either sitting on the edge of his bunk or lying down. From my vantage point I could look across the room and see Luke lying on his upper bunk, the sheet pulled up to his chin. Koko was on the lower adjacent bunk, propped up on one elbow and looking back at me with owlish eyes. In the space between, where the hootenanny had been held, a loose pile of clothing completely covered the neat square hole in the floor.

Five minutes later the Wicker Man got up and went out. We could hear his feet scraping on the porch. We waited. Again the gong was sounded, Carr picking up the reverberation and growling in his gruff manner, his cigar trailing smoke as he rolled down the center of the silent Building.

"*Last* bell! *Last* Bell!!"

Carr moved slowly up one side of the room and down the other, counting the men on their bunks. Then we heard his deep grumble as he spoke to the Wicker Man.

"Fifty-four, Boss."

"Fifty-four. Aw right, Carr."

As late as it was, Dragline was still reading, his nightly array of paper-back novels spread out over his bunk, a half-dozen of them opened to certain penciled sections that dealt with fornication, defloration, prostitution and perversion. Drag's eyes were bulging as they flitted back and forth across the pages, skimming over the superficial details describing characterizations and scenes, the useless dialogue and lame philosophizing, impatiently flipping the pages to reach the next heavily marked section. After a few minutes he would lay down one book and pick up the next, always able to keep the continuity of the different narratives arranged in his mind in perfect order.

He lay there making gasping sounds in his throat,

holding the book in both hands with a trembling grip as his tongue rolled around the perimeter of his toothless mouth. Carr walked by, smiling that grim, stiff, patronizing smile. Dragline waved at him anxiously and then in pantomimed exaggeration he brought the open pages of the book close to his face, his eyes popping, his tongue panting excitedly.

With massive dignity the Floorwalker approached Dragline's bunk, smiling broadly at the hysterical antics as Drag twisted and turned knocking three or four books onto the floor. Then he knelt down and indulgently took the offered book, beginning to read a section emblazoned with scribbled stars and Xs and wavy lines.

"What you got there, Drag?" muttered Carr. "You done bought yourself another one of them fuck-books?"

Carr relit his cigar and began reading. He began to grin.

"Gettin'up, Carr."

"Yeah."

Coon got up from his bunk and shuffled to the john. He flushed the bowl and went back to bed.

In rapid succession, three men asked to get up. Absorbed in the book, Carr answered them without raising his eyes. The Wicker Man was busy, dipping some fresh snuff and whittling on a piece of wood.

And then Dragline turned his head and looked across the room at Luke. Dragline winked.

Already dressed, Luke threw back the sheet and quietly crept out of bed. At the same time two johns were flushed. Another man asked to get up. Without looking, Carr answered out of the side of his mouth.

"Yeah."

I could see it all from where I lay, covering my face with my arm and pretending to be asleep but peeking out from beneath my elbow all the while. I watched Luke as he climbed down from the bunk and slid his legs through the

hole in the floor, wriggling his hips through and then kneeling on the ground with only his head, shoulders and arms protruding. Koko looked on with blinking eyes and a grin, hugging himself in ecstasy beneath the covers. Luke smiled and saluted. By watching his lips I could see what he whispered just before he ducked away.

"So long Koko. Don't forget now. Play it cool."

Luke was gone, just like that, crawling away beneath the Building which is supported by concrete pillars a few feet above the ground. Around the Building is an eighteen-inch strip of the usual chain link fence material. But that same afternoon Luke and his accomplices had found a blind spot at the corner of the Building unseen by the guards and had managed to loosen some nails and wire.

I had to choke down a giggle. The traditional way to escape from the Chain Gang is to go out on the Road and wait until the guard's mind is distracted and then dive into the bushes and run for your very life. But that would have been too easy for Luke. He had to do it the hard way and make history by escaping from the Building itself.

Everything seemed perfectly normal. There were snores. The Wicker Man was whittling. Carr was over by Dragline's bunk, absorbed in the fuck-book. But all the while Cool Hand was crawling away on his hands and knees, emerging out into the yard and the night with only the six-foot fence between him and freedom.

I lay there without moving, wondering who was next. I didn't think that Koko wanted to go because he had already accumulated too much extra Time with his previous escape attempts. And everyone knew that Dragline was still waiting for his parole to come through. But I had no idea of who else was in on the deal nor was there any way of knowing how many men might try to seize on an unexpected opportunity. I shut my eyes, suppressing a giggle as I saw a magnificent panorama of escape, the

entire Family deciding to try a mass break for freedom with everyone streaking off into the darkness and the confusion in a dozen different directions. But as for myself I knew that I could never make it. The idea of running away from it all was one that I had long since given up as hopeless.

Then Society Red sat up and swung his legs over the edge of his bunk.

"Giiiyaaa! Eeeaaa!"

After going off to the toilets, urinating, flushing the bowl and sleepily ambling back to his bunk, Society Red picked up his clothes and shoes wrapped up in a tight package, silently crossed the room and ducked down through the hole. In another minute Blackie followed the same procedure as Dragline eagerly flipped through the pages of another book and shoved it under Carr's nose. Meanwhile Koko lay there on his side watching the parade. I could see him itching and squirming, waging a tremendous battle with temptation, the escape hatch to freedom yawning wide open right beside him. And I knew just how he felt. In spite of everything I too was beginning to feel those ancient notions stirring inside myself.

Then there was a rattling noise outside. The six-foot fence proved to be difficult to get over, the brackets on top of the steel posts supporting the barbed wire making climbing very hard. In the process of grabbing for hand holds and toe tolds Cool Hand's shoes slipped and scraped against the chain link netting. The Wicker Man heard the sound and raised his head to listen, his unrestrained voice booming out loud in the disciplined silence of the Building.

"HEY CARR! WHAT'S THAT OUTSIDE?"

Koko had just been sliding one leg out from under the covers when the alarm was sounded. Swiftly he withdrew it and rolled over, turning his back on the whole affair. Carr threw down the book and ran over to the window, shading his eyes and trying to look out beneath the propped-up

wooden shutters. He was just in time to catch a glimpse of Luke running off into the orange groves, revealed in the dim glare of the small spotlights fitted on top of the truck garage.

"Hey! Somebody's out there, Boss!"

The two men under the Building were trapped. Blackie tried to retreat, crawling back to poke his head up through the hole. Carr spotted him, rushing over all out of breath, grabbing him by the arm and heaving, yelling out to the Wicker Man.

"I got one of 'em Boss! They cut a hole right through the god damn floor! Right through the fuckin' *floor!* But I got one of 'em! Its' this Blackie bastard!"

And Blackie hung there in the Floorwalker's grip, dangling like a stricken marionette stuck in the trap door of a stage show.

The Wicker Man ran outside on the porch and beat the hell out of the brake drum, giving a loud and frantic alarm. Then he stumbled around the Building with a flashlight and his pistol just in time to catch Society Red before he jumped off and ran, a towel wrapped round his waist, his clothes and shoes in his hands, posed on top of the fence like a bird.

The rest of us were snoring like mad. Butter wouldn't melt in our mouths. But I for one had to bite a wad of sheet and cover my face to keep from bursting out with laughter. And Dragline didn't even bother to pretend, his great belly and chest jiggling up and down as he breathed in harsh, smothered gasps of mirth.

Lights went on in the Guard Shack. Feet scraped and pounded here and there on wooden floors and porches. The gate squeaked, doors banged, motors started. The dogs were barking and howling in hysterics, trying to tear down the fence to their pen. Back and forth across the yard we could hear voices giving orders, asking questions,

muttering; the protests, the shouts, the curses and the screams —

“Somebody got away! He’s out there in the groves!”

“Go git the dogs! Quick! And the Dog Boy!”

“Call up the Highway Patrol!”

“How about the Sheriff?”

“Who the hell was it?”

“Who the hell do you think it was? It’s that crazy son of a bitch from Alabama. Cool Hand Luke.”

17

NOBODY GOT MUCH SLEEP THAT NIGHT. There were too many things going on. Everyone lay there, trying his best to appear innocent and yet craning his neck to catch every detail of the show.

Carr dragged Blackie back through the hole in the floor, twisted his arm behind his back and marched him over to the poker table where he forced him to sit down on the bench. Carr waited, looking down towards one end of the Building and then the other end, both fists balled up and placed on his hips, his face screwed up in a scowl that warned us all to stay where we were.

In a few seconds the Wicker Man unlocked the outside door and shoved Society Red inside the Chute. Out in the yard Boss Brown stood in his underwear, blinking his eyes and holding his shotgun with tense desperation. Society Red was brought inside and placed next to Blackie, the two of them sitting there with the hanging heads of naughty children.

Carr paced up and down, his expression ferocious. The Wicker Man was fondling his gun with nervous gestures, his enormous belly jiggling up and down as he panted, still trying to catch his breath. And yet right in the middle of it all, a man actually asked to get up. It was Cottontop.

“Kin ah git up now, Carr?”

Carr just stopped and looked at him.

“Ah gotta take a leak, Carr.”

“Yes, Mister Cottontop. Yes sir. You can git up. Take your leak. But make it damn fast. And damn careful. Otherwise you’ll be leakin’ like a lawn sprinkler.”

We all watched as the white-headed, pink-skinned albino got out of bed, wrapped his towel around his waist and shuffled off to the toilets, his head tilted back, his puffy eyelids half closed, his face composed and unconcerned. He urinated in a bowl and flushed it, turning around and heading back, oblivious to all the eyes, the tension, unaware that every one of us was holding their breath, ready to roll out of bed and fall to the floor in an instant, knowing that if Cottontop were to make a sudden dive for the hole the room would be full of explosions, smoke and scattered shot.

Out in the darkness the dogs were going berserk. They knew that something was happening and they barked and bayed and howled, impatient to be set out on the trail. The Dog Boy was already dressed and putting on his shoes, sitting on the edge of his single bunk which was placed right next to the Wicker as a protection from the rest of us.

Arrogantly the Dog Boy got up from his bed without a word to Carr, heavily scraping his feet on the bare boards as he crossed the floor to the john. He began to brush his teeth under the spigot. Then he rinsed his face and went over to the broken fragment of mirror to comb his hair with lingering strokes. Returning to his bunk, he put on his jacket, lit a cigarette and went over and stood by the gate to the Chute, resting his weight on one leg, his arms folded over his chest. He looked around at all of us, a sly smile on his lips as Carr handed him a folded sheet taken from Luke's bed.

A few minutes later, two guards came up on the porch, fully dressed and armed and ready for the chase. Carr covered the Dog Boy's back as the Wicker Man unlocked the gate to the Chute, blocking the gate with his body until the Wicker Man locked it again. There were mutters and sounds on the porch. We knew the guards had just given the Dog Boy a pistol belt. Then there were footsteps and shadowed forms moving down the sidewalk.

In a few minutes the sounds of the dogs became hysterical, the voice of Big Blue louder and more mellow, distinctive from the rest of the pack. But when the Dog Boy opened the gate to the pens Big Blue must have made a sudden rush for it. Before he could be stopped he was out and gone, racing into the darkness along Luke's trail, his big, powerful voice speaking out into the night, hot, passionate and threatening.

Out of the bedlam of noises, the yelping and yapping, the shouts and curses of the guards, we could hear the angry and forlorn voice of the Dog Boy calling out after his favorite hound.

"Here, you! Blue! Come back here! Come back here I said!"

For the next few minutes the men wrestled with the rest of the pack, cursing and slapping the dogs into obedience, finally managing to get them collared and leashed. They gave them Luke's bed-sheet to sniff and dragged them over to the fence, to the spot where Luke's footprints began. The dogs found the scent, their voices suddenly different, anxious and eager, dragging the Dog Boy behind them as the entire posse set off through the orange groves in pursuit.

The baying of the hounds grew dimmer in the distance. Carr paced up and down the floor. The Wicker Man clicked the safety catch of his gun on and off and on again. Blackie and Society Red still sat where they were.

A little later an unarmed guard came inside the Building with a tool box and a length of two-by-four. Carr hovered behind him as the guard sawed the two-by-four into short lengths, nailing them over the hole in the floor. When he was finished he took the broom handle and began tapping all over the floor and the walls, dragging it across the mesh of the windows.

It must have been at least a half hour before the Yard

Man and Boss Shorty came inside carrying two sets of leg shackles, a ball-peen hammer and a ten-pound sledge. The Captain came in behind them. His false teeth shifting from one side of his mouth to the other, the Yard Man gruffly ordered the two escapees to their feet. They stood there limply, looking down at their ankles as one after the other Boss Shorty fitted a leg ring, closed it, put a short piece of twenty-penny nail through the holes and then riveted over the ends with the hammer, using the sledge as an anvil.

The Captain stood watching and smoking. Casually he pursed his lips and spit. Carr stood behind him, his arms akimbo, glaring at the bunks. But we lay perfectly still. The Captain came over to Blackie, poking at the shackles with the toe of his shoe, both hands deep in his pockets. He turned and looked around at the far recesses of the Building. In a low voice he murmured.

“You sons of bitches are all gonna be sorry about this. You hear? You’re gonna be mighty sorry.”

At a signal the Chute was opened and Blackie and Society Red were taken outside and led down to the Box. For awhile we could hear sounds — the lid of a chamber pot, a door, a snap and a click, a bar slid into place. Then it was quiet, Carr pacing back and forth on his silent, crepe soled shoes.

So we didn’t sleep that night. But we loved every minute of it, rolling from side to side to peep owlishly at the man in the next bunk, then burying our grins in the covers.

18

WE KNEW THE HEAT WAS GOING TO BE ON the whole camp when we went out on the Road the next day. We had all been in on it one way or the other and without our cooperation Luke's escape would have been impossible.

When we got in that night we saw two night shirts draped over the screen in front of the Box. Blackie and Society Red were still locked inside but there was always room for two more. And then Four Eyed Joe and Coon were called out.

But we were far from daunted by a little thing like the Box, counting through the gate in the correct manner but our voices indicating our exuberance. The Building trembled beneath our feet as it was invaded. The different work squads milled together, everyone giving his own interpretations of the flimsy bits and pieces of information that were available. But there was no one to tell us for sure whether or not the dogs were still out, whether Luke had been seen or how large the search party had become.

While we were eating our supper the Yard Man came through the kitchen and stood beside the pistol guard sitting in a chair by the door. He stood there grinding his teeth together and glaring at us over his glasses.

"Yo'll been makin' too much noise out here. Ah don' want to hear that screen door slammin' no more either. Ah done put two men in the Box fer that. If yo'll don't wont to git to go in there with 'em, why, yo'll better watch yoreself."

The Yard Man shifted his teeth a few more times, turned and went back into the Free Men's Messhall. We looked at each other, knowing then what had happened to Coon and

to Four Eyed Joe.

Just as the last few men were checking into the Building a Highway Patrol car pulled up in front of the Captain's office. The two guards who had started out after Luke the night before got out of the back seat and shuffled towards their Messhall. They had mud on their shoes and pants right up to their knees. Their shirt tails were half out, their shoulders slumped, their hats shoved to the back of their heads.

We waited. Several men kept a careful watch through the windows. After they had finished eating they shuffled across the asphalt apron, over the porch and into the Guard Shack. Anxiously we waited for Jabo the Cook to finish up his chores. He no sooner had checked into the Building when men began to sidle up to him. And after he got his Juke open he had a run on candy bars and cold drinks, every customer lingering as long as he dared in order to hear as much as he could about the latest developments in the chase for Cool Hand Luke.

Thus we got our information third and fourth hand but nevertheless we heard all about that wild night of running through the woods and the fields, the swamps and the groves. The main fact was that a bloodhound is virtually useless on a manhunt if he is running loose. A dog must have the restraint of a leash and the guidance of an intelligent trainer. Otherwise he will simply follow his nose, exhausting himself with wasted efforts.

The other fact was that Big Blue was the leader of the pack of dogs kept at the Camp. And whenever they heard Big Blue's voice baying way off in a swamp or a grove somewhere ahead they would answer hysterically, surging along the trail, straining at their leashes, refusing to obey the commands of the Dog Boy.

They would fight their way through briers and mud and over barbed wire fences, Big Blue howling and barking

somewhere in the darkness ahead of them. But then out of the night and the obscurity, just a hundred feet or so to their left, they would hear Cool Hand Luke yelling at them. Not content with outwitting and outrunning them he actually began lingering in the neighborhood, waiting for them to catch up. Wafting through the night like a hunting horn, his voice would boom out of the blackness,

"Hey! You stupid bastards! Not that way! Over here!"

The men in the posse would know what had happened. Luke had backtracked and then waded through some kind of water barrier, made a big, wide loop through some open country and then returned to a point near his original trail where he would just lie down and make himself comfortable.

But they could never convince the dogs who insisted on following a direct line of scent and the sound of Big Blue's voice up ahead. The guards would wrestle with the dogs, kicking and beating them, swearing and tripping over themselves in the dark. Finally striking out on the new trail they would quickly lose it again at the edge of a pond. Again they would have to go around in ever-widening circles until they found the place where the scent left the water.

As a boy Luke had done enough hunting with coon dogs and possum hounds to have learned their ways. So his trail was not the straight, fatal line of desperation of a city-bred convict. It was a bewildering maze of crisscrossing spirals, back-tracks and water barriers. It was like playing tick-tack-toe over the entire countryside. Eventually they expected Cool Hand to give out from sheer exhaustion. But later they came to realize that he was periodically taking naps here and there after having temporarily thrown them off.

He knew the area well enough. He had worked on virtually every road in that part of the country and he had the natural sense of direction of a farmer and a hunter. So

catching him seemed to be impossible. Nor could they ever catch up with Big Blue who relentlessly ran on ahead, unrestrained by the Dog Boy's leash.

Eventually the two guards from our camp just couldn't run any more. In spite of all the stimulation of a manhunt, they had simply outdone themselves. They found a filling station and called up the Captain and the local barracks of the Highway Patrol, giving them their location and asking for relief.

But the Dog Boy refused to be relieved. He asked to be given a hot meal and allowed to stretch out on the ground and sleep for an hour. But he wouldn't let anyone else take over the dogs.

For the second night in a row we couldn't sleep, laying there thinking and dreaming and imagining the whole scene. We knew the real issues that were at stake, the emotions and challenges that were involved. If it hadn't been for Big Blue it might have been different. But as long as his favorite hound was on the loose, the Dog Boy would never allow himself to rest.

The next morning the four men were let out of the Box. But as we lined up for breakfast someone let the screen door to the Messhall slam behind him. There was a sharp intake of breath from everyone in the line. Ears was directly in front of me. When he reached the door he looked all around for the Free Men, grabbed the spring and bent down low with a whispered curse, stretching the spring all the way down to the ground. When I got to the door the spring hung limp in a sagging loop.

That day was long and anxious, the hours dragging at a slow and monotonous pace. All we could think of was getting back to Camp and finding out what was happening. Then we got the command and loaded up, Sleepy chain-smoking all the way in, unbuttoning his shirt and untying his shoe laces, knowing he was going to the Box for letting

the door slam. But to everyone's surprise, no less than four men were called out and taken down to the Box, two men put in each side.

When we got inside the Building we were again amazed. Because there was the Dog Boy, sprawled out on top of his bunk, asleep and fully dressed in his muddy, torn and disheveled clothes. We stared at each other and began to grin.

We grinned even more when we found the brand new spring on the Messhall door, an extra-large, heavy duty model with two overhand knots tied in the middle. It was all you could do to open the door and if you let it slip it would slam like a gunshot. But at that point we didn't much care. The whole thing had become a game and somehow we were convinced that we were winning.

After supper we found out what had happened. Late in the afternoon a county sheriff's car had pulled up to the Captain's Office. A deputy got out and opened the back door, shaking the Dog Boy who was curled up asleep on the back seat. Stiffly he got out, limping as he shuffled around to the rear of the car, his head hanging as he watched the deputy open the trunk.

The Captain and the Yard Man came out of the Office and stood waiting on the porch. The Dog Boy came up the sidewalk, staggering with fatigue and hunger and the weight of Big Blue's dead body which he carried in his outstretched arms, the hound's foaming, blood-flecked tongue protruding out of his jaws.

The Dog Boy came stumbling up to the Captain with tears in his eyes.

"That Mother Fucker! Ah'll git that Cool Hand bastard! You wait Cap'n. Ah'll git even with him! Look what he done! What he done to Blue! He's dead, Cap'n! Dead! Run hisself plumb to death tryin' to catch that stinkin' son of a bitch. He run so hard it just busted his heart."

The Dog Boy had finally given up when the posse had come upon Blue's body lying in the trail. Dazed and grieving, he allowed himself to be relieved. That evening he lay there unconscious, his mouth sagging open as he slept, bearded and dirty, his arms and legs spread-eagled on the bed.

The rest of us were barely able to swallow our grins, humming in a low, indistinct murmur the melody of the song 'Red River Valley' as we shuffled barefooted back and forth to the johns, the shower, the Juke and the poker game.

After the Last Bell we lay on our bunks with open smiles, turning over on our sides to gaze affectionately at Cool Hand's bunk where his mattress was folded over double. Carr finished making his count and reported to the Wicker Man in the same old way, with the same stiff and disciplined manner, the rough, murmured growl —

"Forty-nine, Boss. Four in the Box. And one in the bushes."

The next morning all four men were taken out of the Box and that night when we checked in, four other men were put in. But inside the Building we got the big news. It was all over. Luke's trail had been red hot and fresh when, in broad daylight, it led straight into the suburbs of a nearby town. It went down a residential street and into a housing project and then it completely disappeared.

And so X marked the spot. Luke was off the ground. He had managed to beat the dogs and was long gone, evaporating into thin air.

19

THE NEXT DAY THE WORK WAS RIDICULOUSLY easy. Our shovels didn't weigh a thing. The mosquitoes knew better than to come near us and the sun merely took away the chill.

Because Our Boy had made it. At that very moment he was out there in the Free World representing all of us as our very own fugitive.

Cheerfully we made the day, loading up into the cage truck and lighting up our smokes, getting down on our knees to stare through the bars, Eyeballing at the traffic, the houses, the Cadillacs and the girls. We were the last squad to check in that night. When we arrived we found the other three squads already lined up on the sidewalk, the walking bosses and the guards standing behind them. Everyone had been shaken down but there was no signal to begin checking in through the gate. The Captain sat in his rocking chair on the porch of his Office, his legs crossed, taking a quick drag on his butt and then busily spitting away. The Yard Man stood behind him, his grin distorted by his false teeth. To one side was a trustee and also the Dog Boy who stood there smirking at us.

The Captain said something. The Yard Man went inside the Office and then came out, followed by a shotgun guard who was followed by Cool Hand Luke.

We stood there, our heads bowed, our hats in our hands, our pockets turned inside out. Sullenly we watched as they led Luke down the steps to the sidewalk where they made him take off his shoes and roll up the cuffs of his pants. Then the trustees put the rings of a pair of shackles around his ankles and riveted them closed with a hammer.

Our faces were screwed up tight, almost ready to cry. Luke stood there, his face gaunt and tired and bewhiskered. But he ignored the two men working around his ankles and took out his can of State tobacco, removing a cigarette paper and beginning to roll a smoke, glancing up for a sly wink at Koko. Holding his head erect and his shoulders back, he sprinkled the tobacco in the folded paper with calm and steady fingers. Just as he took out his matches and was lighting up, the Captain got out of his rocking chair, came down the steps, pulled a blackjack out of his hip pocket and let Cool Hand have it right behind the ear.

The can fell on the sidewalk with a clatter, spilling tobacco and papers. Luke sagged, falling on top of the Dog Boy who cursed and struggled with flailing fists to get out from under the sudden dead weight that had landed on his head and shoulders. Then he froze, drawing back as the Captain shouldered him aside, kicking at Luke's belly and letting out a shrill nasal scream.

"Get up! Get up you damn bastard! Don't you never smoke in front of me again! You hear? You hear? Never! Never! Now stand up there right. The way you're supposed to."

Luke raised up on one elbow, shaking his head and blinking his eyes, a trickle of blood streaming down his cheek, his ear and neck. He struggled, slipped, fell back again, almost lapsing into unconsciousness. The Captain stood over him, hissing.

"Stand up, damn you! Stand up when I talk to you."

Luke got up, swaying as the trustees went on with their work, bent over in an apprehensive crouch.

We stood there watching until they finished putting on the shackles. Then they took him by the arms and led him forward, stopping just a few feet in front of us. The Yard Man barked an order and we started through the gate, each of us looking into Cool Hand's face, trying to tell him

something with our eyes just as we tried to tell him something with our voices as we turned our heads and counted off,

"— *four*-teen — FIFTEEN! — (Sixteen) — seven-TEEN?"

So the glorious escape had failed. Luke was thrown into the Box and the next day sent out on the Road. All day he dug and pitched, clumsy with the unfamiliar links fettering his legs, the chain rattling and banging awkwardly as he kicked against the blade of his shovel.

All day Boss Kean stood over Luke, assigned as his personal guard. Boss Kean has served on the Florida Chain Gang for twenty-two years. Before that he was on the Georgia Chain Gang for eleven years. A true Cracker, he was born and raised on the edge of the Okeefenokee Swamp, a dedicated, hard working, God-fearing man. And in all his years of guarding convicts he ain't never had to kill no white man. He killed a few niggers in his time but never no white man. Course he wounded two of them once but they never did die.

But still you never can tell. And he'd sure hate to have to shoot no white man. But a body has to do his work. Boss Kean believes in work. And any time he catches either of his two no 'count sons fooling around reading or if he just finds some old book or magazine or one of them newspapers laying around the house, why, he just throws it out into the yard, that's all. He never had no use for reading himself. Never did have time to bother learning how to do it. Too busy out doing a man's work. In fact he don't believe in nothing that takes a man's mind away from his work. No sir. A man should never let nothing take his mind away from his work.

Not once during the day did Luke dare look up. Even when a car slowed down and the driver threw out a pack of Free World cigarettes that landed almost at his feet, he had to go on with his shoveling, leaving them lying there,

untouched and unseen. And with the Heat as bad as it was, we didn't dare try to talk to him, to find out what had happened, pretending to ignore his very existence.

Hour after hour Boss Kean stood nearby, going on and on.

"Ah hears tell you don't b'lieve in no God, Luke. Ah was wonderin' how come a nice lookin' young feller like you was to come to git in heah. But now ah reckons ah knows."

The old man began to pace back and forth, growing tense, anxious, his own thoughts making him angry, shifting his shotgun from one arm to the other and idly fingering the butt of his pistol. Across the road the other guards watched. Farther down the line Boss Paul stood and smiled. And farther still Boss Godfrey leaned heavily on his Walking Stick, the blank wall of his face turned Luke's way, seeing nothing, yet seeing all.

Boss Kean went on:

"Even the heathen, them Chinee people and them thar Japs — even *they* knows thar's *somethin'* up yonder. Ah jes don' unnerstan' how a feller kin stan' thar and say he don't *b'lieve*. No suh! Don't nevah tell me that. That's one thing ah b'lieves in. The soopreme spir't. Eff'n thar warn't no hereafter — why — eff'n a man was to git in mah way, ah'd jes blow his haid off. Right off. An' think no more about it than eff'n it war a rabbit. Eff'n ah seen a gal and ah wonted a piece. Ah'd jes take it off'n her and go on. Eff'n they was to hang me, ah wouldn't keer. Ah could suffer a few minutes aw right. But for *eternity!* No suh. Don't tell me that. No spir't? Oh, man. Naw. Naw."

That night when the Bull Gang got out of the truck and lined up, there was only one night shirt ready. After we were shaken down there was a pause while the Captain slowly exhaled the cigarette smoke through his nose.

"Luke. Boss Kean says you were Eyeballin' today."

Luke said nothing.

"Well? What about it?"

"Yes sir, Captain."

They put Luke in the Box. In the morning they took him out and sent him back to the Road. All day Boss Kean stood over him and heckled and jibed and that night the Captain again called Luke out and said he had been Eyeballing and again they put him in the Box.

This went on for a week. Luke was living on just two meals a day; a breakfast of thin grits, one egg, a couple of catheads; a dinner of corn bread and beans. But as far as anyone could tell, this didn't bother Luke any. He just ate more beans than he usually did, cut down on his smoking and learned how to be comfortable sleeping in the Box.

But since Luke was never allowed to come into the Building we never had a chance to talk to him. Finally we couldn't stand it any longer. So in spite of the Heat, a few of us gathered around him at Bean Time.

Cool Hand lay there stretched out on the ground, leaning his back against the trunk of a gigantic live oak tree that shaded the entire Bull Gang with its canopy of gnarled, twisted branches and its festoons of Spanish moss. He took a long, thoughtful drag on his cigarette, stared up into the leaves overhead and in a matter-of-fact voice, he told us all about it.

For three nights and two days the chase had gone on. Luke would run and dodge the dogs and then lay down for short naps, his instinct telling him when to wake up and start running again. He lived on oranges he picked in the groves, vegetables he swiped from gardens and ate raw, water he drank from the ponds. But in the end he decided he was going to have to steal a car.

Coming to the outskirts of a town, he hid in a clump of palmettos, examining the rows of houses in the new development. He was still wearing his convict clothes and the posse was getting close. He was nearly cut off from the

woods and was facing the prospect of trying to run through the streets of a residential area.

Then a woman drove up and parked her car in a front yard, getting out and carrying a baby into the house. Luke ran across the street and got in. The keys were still in the ignition lock and he started up and drove away.

Not until later did he realize that the back seat was loaded with groceries. Eagerly he ate white bread, cookies, butter in huge mouthfuls, sugar right out of the bag. He ate raisins, sardines, an apple, a banana — goodies some of us haven't tasted in years.

So anyhow. It's a good thing that woman took the baby out first. You know? Instead of the groceries? Otherwise they'd of had me up on a kidnappin' rap. That really would be somethin'. As it is I'll probably get more Time. For swipin' the car. They told me they're gonna bring me up on charges for that.

Off the ground at last, Luke roared away in the car to escape the immediate area. Then he drove off the main highway and went up a lonely dirt trail, just two grooved ruts winding through the woods. He parked under some trees and then curled up and went to sleep, getting his first real rest in days. He didn't wake up until long after dark, ate some more of the woman's groceries and then began driving back to the highway.

Behind a juke joint that was going in full swing he found some cars parked away from the glare of the bright neon lights out front. He swiped a license plate from one of them and used it to replace the one on the hot car, getting in and heading straight for the Alabama State line.

Luke was clever. He stayed on back roads, guided by a road map he found in the glove compartment of the car. He knew he could only count on a few hours before his ruse would be discovered but he was careful not to attract any attention by driving too fast.

But what Luke didn't know was that in the state of Florida the first number of a license plate signifies the county in which it is registered. And if the car is above a certain weight the first number is followed by a lower case 'w'. Inadvertently he had swiped the wrong kind of plate, taking it from a Buick sedan and putting it on a two-door Ford.

Cool Hand kept heading north and west, wondering how long his gasoline would hold out. By three in the morning he was in Pensacola, pulled up behind a semi-trailer waiting for a red light. And then a police car came out of a side street on a routine patrol and pulled up behind Luke's car. He saw them in the rear-view mirror. It was a delayed traffic light. The seconds dragged on. And then one of the two cops spotted the wrong tag and got out to investigate. Cool Hand saw him coming but there was nothing he could do. The semi-trailer prevented him from driving away and the prowl car was too close behind him to try to run for it. So all he could do was sit there, smoking a cigarette and drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, hoping that somehow he could brazen it out.

But already suspicious, the cop approached the car on the side opposite the driver's seat. When he looked through the window he saw the stripe on Luke's pant leg. Immediately he pulled his pistol, aimed it at Luke and began yelling for his partner to come over. Not until then did the traffic light change and the semi-trailer drove away.

So Luke was caught. It was as easy as that.

20

HE HOBBLED ALONG, DOING HIS TIME WITHOUT ever making a complaint, working as only he knew how to work. Every night they took him out of line and put him in the Gator. Every morning he was taken out and put back on the Road, never allowed to come into the Building to take a shower or shave or to change his clothes, the blood still there on the side of his head, matted in his hair above the raw cut left by the Captain's blackjack. After a few days he looked like a bewhiskered animal; a shackled, limping, foul-smelling beast. We growled and muttered among ourselves. No one had ever been hard-timed like this before. But the Free Men had a very special hard-on for Luke and they were never going to let him up.

The Dog Boy was delighted by the whole situation. Every morning he would be in the line of trustees in the Messhall, ladling out the coffee, the grits, the fat back and our very own egg. He would wait with a big grin until Luke was brought in from the Box and put at the end of the chow line. Then he would Loudtalk at Luke, making all sorts of wisecracks.

"Hey, hogbelly. You ain't got to eat so much no more. Your runnin' days are over. Ole Lawyer Bush said he couldn't git you no parole no way. So hell, man. Take it easy. Look, ah'll jes give you one cathead. Fer now. You can always come back a little later if you want another one."

The Silent System applies to everyone in the Messhall, the trustees obliged to keep their own talking down to a minimum of business only. But the Dog Boy had always enjoyed a special status with the Free Men and in this case they were greatly amused by his wit.

Luke never said a word. He just looked at the Dog Boy and held out his plate, standing there quietly until he was served. Until the day the Dog Boy snarled at him,

"Well, hogbelly. It's gittin' so's you even smell like a gawd damn pig. The way you stink we sure wouldn't have no trouble trackin' you down the next time. Hell, I could even follow your trail myself."

Luke stood there in his filth, bearded, bleary eyed and exhausted. In a low, deep voice that filled the Messhall, the kitchen and the Guard's Messhall next door, he growled,

"Your nose has been out of joint for so damn long it wouldn't surprise me none. Besides, for a natural-born son of a bitch like you, it oughtta be easy."

Everyone stopped what he was doing. The Dog Boy just stood there, his hands trembling, his eyes popping wide. No one had ever dared to talk in the Messhall that way. Yet we all knew that Luke was going to get away with it. His other sins were of such an awful magnitude that he had a kind of immunity for the breach of ordinary laws such as these.

But we weren't fooled. One word out of any of us and it would have meant the Box.

One afternoon, in the middle of the second week of this routine, Luke had to go. He asked Boss Kean if he would take him off the road and into the bushes so he could dig a hole. At that moment Boss Godfrey came strolling by and overheard the request. Waving his Stick over his head, he called out to Rabbit to bring him his rifle from the truck. When he came up with it, Boss Godfrey took the bolt out of his pocket, inserted it into the breech and then put in a clip of cartridges. He looked at Luke, holding the rifle in the crook of his arm, swinging his Walking Stick very casually.

"All right Luke. Go up and dig your hole. Go way out so nobody in the cars will see you. Take your time. Have a real good one. But keep shakin' a bush as you shit. You hear? Don't never stop shakin' that bush. You know what'll

happen if you do."

We all kept working, concentrating, looking down at our feet. Again. Something was up.

Luke stared directly into the mirrored eyes of the Walking Boss. There was the faintest sign of a smile on his lips. Then he took up his shovel and bent over to pick up a piece of old newspaper lying in the ditch. Clambering up the bank, he awkwardly began climbing up and over the post of a barbed wire fence, hampered by his chain and getting over it with great difficulty. But he stayed fairly close to the road, almost in plain view of the passing traffic in spite of the Walking Boss' invitations.

"Go on Luke. What the hell. Make yourself comfortable. Go on way out so's you can drop your britches in peace. A man's got to have a little privacy sometimes. Right?"

Luke just smiled. Digging up a shovelful of dirt, he dropped his pants and squatted. And all the while he hung onto a small live oak bush in front of him, shaking it continuously, the hard, tough little leaves rustling audibly so that all of us down in the ditch could plainly hear the sound.

The Walking Boss let the rifle dangle loosely in his hands as though he were thinking of something else. Switching his Stick to the same hand that held the rifle, he dug out a cigar and lit it clumsily, bending his neck down to strike a match. For a second or two it seemed as though he were vulnerable. We held our breath. But the bush kept on shaking.

We almost jumped out of our skins when the gun went off. Neither aiming nor raising his arms, Boss Godfrey fired, the bullet ricocheting off the ground right under Luke's bare behind. But there wasn't the slightest reaction from Luke. There was no outcry. He didn't even flinch. It was as though he had felt nothing, as though he hadn't even heard.

"Are you still shakin' that bush, Luke?"

"Yes suh, Boss. I'm shakin' it all right."

Again Boss Godfrey fired. Again the bullet threw sand on Luke's behind, bouncing off the ground and ricocheting through the bushes and trees with a vicious snarl and a delayed, spiteful echo.

"Still shakin', Luke?"

"Still shakin', Boss."

Again and again the rifle fired, the woods echoing with the shots, the air bitter with gun smoke. But the bush was still shaking. Luke finally finished. Carefully he wiped his ass with the scrap of old newspaper. Then he stood up, buttoned his pants and buckled his belt, still kicking at the trunk of the bush with his left foot. Covering his cat hole with a shovelful of dirt, he called out loud and clear.

"Comin' out, Boss."

"All right Luke. Sure. Come on out."

We were aghast at this performance on the part of the Walking Boss, dumbfounded at the degree of coolness displayed by Luke. And as soon as we loaded up into the truck that night Dragline began to raise hell with his buddy.

"Man, oh *man!* Are you nuts? Are you out of your feeble, fuckin' mind? Defyin' the Walkin' Boss that a-way? You're jes *askin'* to git your ass shot off. You know that? Jes a-beggin' for it."

But Luke just grinned.

"What's the matter Drag? Ain't you got no faith? You know that man there is a pretty good shot."

"*Pretty* good? Shit. He could shoot the tail feathers off'n a *fly*. But ah knows more about that Man than you do. And ah'm tellin' yuh. You'd better watch yore ass."

So when Luke asked to dig another hole the very next

day we couldn't believe it. Yet the same performance was repeated, the Walking Boss firing away at Luke's feet as he climbed up the ditch bank, a bullet cutting a strand of wire right out of his hands as he climbed the fence, three or four shots flicking sand on his bare ass as he squatted and another making the pan of his shovel ring like a bell as he returned to work, the handle slung over his shoulder. But the bush-shaking never faltered and the rattling cadence of Luke's shackled step never stumbled nor hesitated.

This time Dragline had nothing to say. None of us did. It was all too much for us. Flabbergasted into complete silence, we just floated along through the day, thinking of other things, dreaming our fantasies which were far easier to understand and believe than the things that were going on around us.

The following morning we hadn't been working more than an hour when still again Luke asked if he could dig a hole. For the first time Boss Godfrey showed some sign of being annoyed.

"God damn it to hell. Don't you never take a crap in the mornin' before you check out? Didn't they give you a pot in the Box there with you?"

"Yes suh. Boss. But it's them beans. I jes cain't help it. It's all them beans I been eatin'."

"All right, damn it. Rabbit! Rabbit! Bring me mah rifle from the truck! And be quick about it!"

"Pickin' up this here paper, Boss Kean! Boss Paul!"

"Yeah. Pick it up, Luke."

It was still early in the day. The sky was overcast, the air was damp and everyone was sluggish. Even the Walking Boss seemed lethargic and didn't feel like playing his game. Without interfering he allowed Luke to climb the fence and go out into the bushes, turn over a clump of dirt and stick his shovel in the ground in front of him. Then the shaking of the bush began. There was silence in the air. And

boredom. Everyone was doing the usual things.

Then the bush stopped shaking.

"Luke!"

Bang. Bang.

Twice the Walking Boss fired in rapid succession, his hand working the bolt back and forth in a dim blur.

Everything was quiet, a thin blue cloud of bitter smoke hanging in the air. We stopped working and just stood there, the guards nervously holding their shotguns at the ready. Boss Godfrey climbed the fence and ran towards Luke's shovel which was still visible, vertical in the ground. The shovel handle had been hit twice, the wood splintered, daylight visible through the bullet holes. But Luke was nowhere around.

Waving his rifle, Boss Godfrey shouted,

"Jim! Bring up the truck! Hurry it up, damn it! Drive it on up here! Run! Damn your lazy ass! *Run!*"

He clambered down the ditch bank and up the shoulder to the road. Leaping into the truck, the Walking Boss roared away at top speed, headed for the nearest telephone.

What had happened was this:

Luke had seen a dirty old kite string wound around a stick lying in the ditch that some kid must have thrown or dropped out of a passing car. Instantly he recognized his opportunity. He called out to the guards and picked up a piece of scrap newspaper but managed to cover the ball of string and pick it up in his hand at the same time. Reaching the thicket, going out a little farther than he had ever gone before, he tied the string to the trunk of a bush in the same time it would have normally taken him to drop his pants. He kept shaking the bush as he backed away, jerking on the cord as though he were flying a kite or playing a hooked fish, unwinding the string with his left hand as he went. The string was about three hundred feet long. When he

reached the end, Cool Hand dropped it, turned around and ran. It was his own private version of the Indian Rope Trick, the rifle firing a salute as he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

When the Dog Boy and his hounds arrived they began the chase by following the string through the thicket. But the route was so simple they couldn't believe it. There was something eerie about the way that the thin white line led through the bushes. And after all, what can you trust in this world? For instance: if they pulled the string, would the bushes explode?

But the dogs began the hunt with straining eagerness, the posse and the Dog Boy following behind the pack in high spirits. This time it was going to be easy. And they were hoping they would be able to catch up with him alone in some isolated woods so they could fix him once and for all. At the very most Luke didn't have more than forty-five minutes start and they knew that no man can run very fast while wearing leg shackles.

But for the next several hours we could faintly hear the hounds barking and baying out in the woods. After a long period of silence we could hear them again, coming closer, their voices faint and far away. The day went by. We had our Smoking Period and then we had beans. Still the posse didn't return. Yet all this time we went about our work with straight faces and in dead silence, unable to express our inner hilarity, our derision for the inept forces of the Free Men who weren't even able to catch a man in chains.

After we checked into the Building that night and found that there was still no word of Luke we began to grin at each other. We knew. We knew that in some miraculous way he was going to make it.

So again, we were simply overjoyed. After the Last Bell we turned over in our bunks to smirk at the doubled mattress as Carr finished his count and reported to the

Wicker Man.

"Fifty-one, Boss. And two in the bushes."

"What? Another one? Who is it this time, Carr?"

"The same one, Boss. Cool Hand Luke."

21

AGAIN, THERE WAS NO SLEEP. IN THE SILENCE of the Building our imaginations were roaring. We lay there with closed eyes, the inner surfaces of our lids emblazoned with that fugitive landscape across which Cool Hand was running, his legs making that quick, short-stepping gait of a Chain Man, the shackle leaping and snapping like an iron viper clinging to his heels.

Fitfully we tossed in our bunks. It was a hot and airless night and we sweated in the dank humidity. At one end of the Building someone let go with a loud fart, one that made a moist flapping sound. Eighteen bunks away, someone answered with a high pitched, alternating note. For an hour there was the soft sound of a poker game, cards riffling, coins clinking, then the quiet tread of Carr's shoes as he paced away another night of his sentence. Always there were the noises of a man getting up to go to the john, the squeaking of springs as a man turned over in his bunk.

An hour or so before dawn there was a commotion outside the fence. A truck drove up. There were voices. The truck motor started again and droned its way around the Messhall, the kitchen and the laundry shed, past the woodshed and the Floorwalker's Shack. There were rattles and bangs. A few dogs let out some brief, unenthused barks. It was quiet. There were footsteps on the porch. A voice spoke to the Wicker Man who went outside and unlocked the door, locking it again as the Dog Boy stepped into the Chute. Carr swung the gate open, the Dog Boy came in, Carr shut the gate and the Wicker Man locked it. The Dog Boy shuffled over to his bunk, pulled off his shoes and his clothes and then fell back with a sigh, throwing his arm across his eyes to shut out the light from the bare bulbs

in the ceiling.

A few of us rolled over on our sides, raising our heads and exchanging puzzled looks with other men. It looked as though they had given up. The dogs had been called off. But it wasn't until the end of the following day that we were able to get the full story of how Luke managed to get away, piecing it together from fragments of random information.

When the posse started out they expected to run him down in an hour, especially since he was making no attempt to lay down a false trail but instead was running in a perfectly straight line. At first they thought that he had no choice. He was in orange grove country. The ground was well cultivated and soft and his footprints were so clear and unmistakable they didn't even need the dogs.

But then they began to get suspicious. His traces were too definite and showed no signs of indecision. He was just running, running as hard as he could. But he was heading somewhere. He had a plan.

The groves came to an end and they reached an area of scrub pines and palmetto bushes, approaching a place where two unimportant state roads joined together in a junction. In the apex there was a tiny hamlet of Negro shacks huddled together in a warped and sagging, unpainted heap.

This was the same hamlet that had been attacked by a mob of white men about a year before after two teenage colored boys had been jailed for attempting to rape a white woman. Luke knew about this place. One day the Bull Gang had worked with bush axes in the drainage ditches that ran along the road. Luke had also worked his way past the wrecked and burned remains of the cabins that had been attacked after the mob discovered that the boys had been whisked away from the county jail and taken to Raiford for protective custody. They had turned their fury on the

village, terrorizing the inhabitants, firing pistols and shotguns through windows and walls, breaking into abandoned cabins where the boys had lived and smashing up the furniture. When they began to set fires the highway patrol finally interfered, dispersing the mob and dousing the flames.

Luke had played it cool. He knew that these people would sympathize with him, that they wouldn't care what he had done nor would they bother wasting time asking what crimes he had committed. They would only see that he was a man who was being persecuted, a fugitive from the same Law which had never been on their side.

His arrival was heralded by the baying of bloodhounds approaching through the nearby groves. Then a wild apparition staggered through the jumble of shacks, right up the middle of the dirt lane that led between the yard fences and flower beds, the rusting carcasses of dead jalopies; a filthy, sweating, bewhiskered white man, naked to the waist and wearing a muddy white stripe down his pant legs, a partially healed wound and a patch of dried blood over his ear, a length of chain between his ankles that rattled and tinkled as he stumbled with quick, short desperate steps through the dust of their isolated, impoverished little world.

He was only minutes ahead of his pursuers. The guards and the hounds, the Dog Boy and the Sheriff's deputies came out of the woods in a cloud of dust, with yells and barking, instructions and questions shouted back and forth. It was obvious that Luke had reached the hamlet, hobbled straight through and left. The lawmen yelled to the Negroes out on their porches. But no one answered.

At most a head was shaken with pouting looks and a muted reply.

Nevertheless, the scent led them right up the middle of the sandy lane. They walked through the yards, looking for

possible hiding places. But their search revealed nothing except frightened black faces and rolling eyeballs peering through the windows.

Everything was quiet and normal. There was a fire of lightwood kindling in a backyard beneath a big iron kettle of boiling lye soap. A broken commode rested at an angle underneath a lemon tree. Twisted sheets of rusty corrugated iron lay scattered about while another fire heated a washtub full of laundry near a line propped up by old boards. There was a rusty farm pump on the edge of a back porch which had several boards missing from the floor, a stack of concrete building blocks, a car with no wheels and no motor quietly sinking into a motionless maelstrom of sand. Flowers and vines grew everywhere, tangled over the piles of junk and over the porches, behind the chicken coops and the remains of old fences.

But Luke's trail became confused and then lost among the footprint's trampled in the sand and the complications of the various scents of the community. The dogs were led away, taken out to the nearby road and patiently circled this way and that. Eventually the scent was picked up again. With whoops and hollers the posse climbed a fence and started across an open cow pasture. And then, without warning, in the middle of nowhere at all, just like that — the trail stopped.

The dogs went round and round, yelping with confusion. Sneezing and gagging, they began scratching at their muzzles with their paws. Cursing and stamping his feet with anger, the Dog Boy realized what had happened. The Negroes had given Luke all the black pepper and all the chile powder and curry they had in their kitchens so he could sprinkle it behind him as he ran to obliterate his trail in a fine, irritating cloud.

It was more than an hour before the dogs' noses began to clear. Even then it was mainly due to the Dog Boy's skill and persistence that they were able to put the dogs out in

the right direction.

All day and into the night they would find the trail and then abruptly lose it again in a cloud of spices, quite aware that Luke was hidden within a stone's throw of them, lying in the bushes somewhere and watching them, resting up for his next dash. But all they could do was persevere, patiently unraveling the snarled patterns of his escape.

After dark Luke began to use other tricks. He walked right down the middle of a highway to mix his spoor with the smell of asphalt, rubber tires and carbon monoxide. When headlights would appear he dropped flat in the ditch and covered his face so that it wouldn't be reflected in the light. But the Dog Boy caught on. Afterwards they simply followed the ditch, skipping along from one ducking place to another as though they were stepping stones in a brook.

Luke soon learned what they were doing and switched to other tactics. Several times he climbed over a barbed wire fence, made a gigantic loop through open grazing land and then returned and recrossed the fence. Once again he would make another long, complicated curve, repeating the same pattern he made on the other side. Then he broke the pattern, running along the fence, crossing it, running a mere hundred feet or so and crossing the fence still again. Even with chains on it was far easier for him to climb over the barbed wire than for men trying to control an hysterical pack of hounds straining on their leashes.

Finally his trail led directly to the edge of a large lake and stopped. The posse split up the pack and went around the lake on both sides. But when they couldn't pick up the new trail they concluded that he had merely gone up to the water's edge and then back-tracked the way he had come. But again his trail was heavily spiced, the dogs temporarily helpless, the men forced to rely entirely on their wits and imagination.

They decided that Luke had back-tracked to a brook that

he had previously forded. Wading knee-deep for over a mile he then came to a railroad bridge and followed the tracks, walking on top of the ties which were new and soaked with fresh creosote, their odor strong and acid.

Time and again Luke threw them off with one ruse after the other just as they thought they were about to run him down. Still, they were persistent, prodded by the stubborn enthusiasm of the Dog Boy who kept hitching up his pistol belt and wetting his lips with his tongue, coming up with yet one more solution to every riddle that Luke presented.

But Luke eventually beat the dogs. At two thirty in the morning his trail had been fresh and hot when it disappeared finally and forever in the backyard of a farmhouse at the stump of a live oak tree which was used for a chopping block. They could read the story spelled out by the marks on the ground. Luke had lain on his back, the shackle draped over the stump. With several awkward but powerful strokes of the axe, he had cut his own chain.

He was gone. The only evidence of his departure was a broken chain link and the dulled old axe sticking up straight, the handle silhouetted against the moonlit sky like a gesture of derision. Once again he had disappeared, wafted away in a fragrant cloud of pepper, borne up into nothingness with a sneeze.

We were beside ourselves when we heard this part. We could see it all — the dogs milling about in the yard, yelping and coughing, the chickens squawking, cattle stampeding in the pasture; voices, curses, lights put on in the farmhouse. We could just picture Luke running off through the woods, singing as he went, his legs graceful and swift. When the thin silver of the crescent moon peeked out from the clouds we knew that Cool Hand had stopped to look aloft and grin —

"Yes sir, *Boss!* I see yuh up there!"

So it was really our own watchful eye that he had left

behind in the dust, the shining, twisted center link of his chain lying there winking up in defiance at the outraged moon-eye of Boss Godfrey.

22

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS THE RUMORS FLEW thick and fast around the Camp, filtering down to us from the powers above. There were whispers, overheard conversations, lies and wishful thinking. Guards and trustees dropped a word with total unconcern, just as you would a butt, while we poor beggars scrambled to retrieve it. Guards were always telling things to the cooks, the trustees overhearing things from the walking bosses. And whenever Rabbit took up a Store Order there was always someone who wanted to buy the local paper which was carefully examined for some small, one-paragraph item in the back pages.

Significant clues were made out of scraps of gossip, conclusions drawn from vagrant thoughts, theories projected on the basis of the thinnest news. Bit by bit we gathered it all together; the witnessed fact that a pair of overalls were known to be missing from a neighborhood clothesline. Not far away a house had been entered but only a shirt, a comb and a pair of shoes had been stolen. Simultaneously, forty miles distant, a .38 pistol, a thousand dollars in traveler's checks, a box of condoms and a bottle of Scotch had been deftly removed from a hotel room. Elsewhere a burglar had broken into a hunting lodge in Ocala in order to use a razor — the culprit's whiskers and grime left behind in the sink as evidence. And at that very moment a girl's bicycle was being swiped in St. Petersburg, a sports car in Palm Beach, a Shetland pony in Tallahassee.

Time and again we heard that Cool Hand had been caught — captured by a farmer, by a railroad brakeman while hopping a freight, by a thirteen-year-old boy hunting squirrels with a .22 rifle, a fat housewife who shot him in

the leg while stealing chickens. They even said that he had tried to hitch-hike a ride on Route 301 but the driver who picked him up turned out to be an off-duty detective who gracefully deposited him at the door of the county sheriff.

But we knew that Luke had gotten away. After two days they called off the search, the Dog Boy sullen and glowering at us for weeks afterwards. It wasn't long before three Newcocks arrived from Raiford and they straightened out Luke's mattress and assigned his bed to someone else. And Koko began to teach himself how to play the banjo.

Weeks passed. Then months. As we worked and ate and played we were always thinking of Luke. We imagined him out there in the Free World, lying on satin sheets, basking nude in an air-conditioned suite of rooms, drinking fine liqueurs and screwing only the most voluptuous of women, all of whom fell madly in love with him at the slightest touch.

We argued as to how he was making a living. When he first drove by he wasn't a professional thief but a year of living with the Family had taught him the tricks of many trades. So we wondered, inventing all sorts of fantastic exploits for the greater glory of his name. We imagined that he was slyly engaged in Dipping, Boosting, Pushing, Creeping, Heisting or Hanging Paper.

Since it represented the very acme of his own ambitions, Dragline firmly believed that Luke was now a Hollywood pimp. But Koko, for the same reasons, was convinced he had gone to Paris and had become an International Jewel Thief. Others insisted he was a Gigolo, a Con Artist, a Gun Runner, a member of the Syndicate. Some of us, to be sure, thought that he had simply found himself a job. But this was sacrilege. That Luke should become a Square John was too much. Not Luke. Not our very own Cool Hand.

And the Good Time rolled. After his escape was assured, we began to work with a renewed will. The guards were

watchful and silent as we leaped into the mud and the bushes and the sand with a joyful frenzy, with our war cry growled and grunted up and down the line:

"Maybe we're diggin' and dyin'. But Cool Hand is fuckin' and flyin'. So go hard, bastard. Go hard."

Then all our wildest fantasies were verified once and for all. Dragline's uncle came to visit him one Sunday and gave him a sackful of groceries and a Movie Magazine. Later, back inside the Building, he flipped through the pages of the magazine and found a glossy, eight-by-ten photograph which had been sent by a clandestine mail route for special delivery.

We all gathered round, our mouths sagging open. Koko and Dragline went berserk with happiness. They punched each other on the shoulder, hugged each other, danced and virtually screamed their curses of endearment right into each other's grinning faces. Koko kept saying 'oo-oo-oo', over and over again, his lips pouted as though ready to whistle or ready to kiss something, his right hand shaking as though he had burned his fingers.

There he was. Seated in a night club in New Orleans, he was dressed in a dark suit, a silk tie with a big Windsor knot, starched French cuffs with sparkling gold links. Behind him was a jazz band and a stripper who was doing her stuff. On the table were Free World butts, a lighter, a bucket of champagne, gleaming, long-stemmed glasses, a stack of green folding money casually strewn about.

He had both arms spread around the bare shoulders of a blond and a brunette who cuddled up to him on either side, smiling eagerly into the camera, their bare bosoms bursting out of their evening gowns. In one hand he held up a champagne glass and in the other he held a spread hand of cards showing five aces. His handsome, barbered face wore a great big smile which seemed to be speaking to us through the handwritten words scrawled at the bottom of

the photograph:

Dear Boys;
Playing it cool. Wish you were here.
Love, Cool Hand Luke

23

IT SOON CAME TO BE KNOWN SIMPLY AS — The Picture

We would come in at night, exhausted and covered with mud, with sweat and mosquito bites, our pants sopping wet and stuck with sand spurs; feeling bored, depressed, lonely, feeling our Time would never come to an end and almost ready to take the Razor Blade Route. We would sit there slumped on the floor, not allowed to sit or lie down on our bunks while wearing dirty clothes yet too exhausted to get up and take a shower. Our muscles would be stiff and cramped, our heads aching and dizzy.

In our language, to be depressed is to have the Black Ass. Which is to remember clean clothes, shined shoes, a double bed, a world containing forks, doorknobs, clocks and chairs, to remember friends, mistakes, days of old to taste a steak, a kiss —.

Then someone would begin to hum to himself, looking far away, his head leaned back against the wall, a forgotten cigarette in his fingers. A certain gleam would come into his eyes and he would get up and go over to Dragline's bunk, kneeling down on the floor beside him to whisper fervently and hoarsely,

"Hey Drag. Let me look at *The Picture*. Come on. Lemme. Huh? Just for a few minutes. I wanna see Luke with that broad. That brunette. And that loot and that booze. And that other broad, shakin' her bare ass behind him."

"Aw, come on Babalugats. You don't really want to look at that dirty ole picture, do yuh?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I wanna. I wanna."

“But what for? It’s just one of them tourist postcard things. Like people send back home from Miami and places.”

“I know. I know.”

“So what good is it?”

“It’s good. It’s good. I wanna look. Come on. OK? Huh?”

“Well, ah don’ know. It might give you bad ideas. It might even cause you to git a little rabbit in yore blood. Ah mean, it’s pretty dangerous stuff. An ’eff’n that mean ole Wicker Man over yonder was to see it — Why, he might even wanna take it away. Somebody might even git to go out and see Silver Springs for the rest of the night. Maybe fer two or three nights.”

“I’ll be careful. Whaddaya think? I’m stupid?”

“Never mind that. ‘Portant thing is, how much would it be worth to take a peek at this here Picture? A quick peek ah’m talkin’ about. Not no memorizin’ job.”

“A cold drink?”

“A cold drink? You mean one cold drink? To feast yore starvin’ fishy li’l eyes on *The Picture*? A true vision of Paradise itself? With three of the Angels right there in plain sight a-playin’ and a-friskin’ ‘round wif mah boy?”

“A cold drink? Huh?”

“Well — OK. It’s a deal. One *Pepsi*, eff’n you please. Like pay in advance? One sweaty, chilly bottle right here in mah hot, li’l hand?”

Finally Dragline would permit himself to be cajoled into taking out the Movie Magazine from under his mattress, to look over and see what Carr and the Wicker Man were doing and then slip it to Babalugats who leaned against the wall and held the magazine up against his knees, pretending to be engrossed in reading. For a long time he would sit there without moving. Slowly his face would begin to relax, a smile of rapture spreading through the dirt

and the sunburn, his eyes flitting here and there as he drank in the glory, the beauty and the sanctity of that very private view of the Free World.

24

IT HAPPENED ABOUT FOUR MONTHS LATER. We were working on the Dead Tree Road which was named after an enormous and macabre dead oak tree covered with moss, one side of the trunk blackened from some ancient brush fire. It stood in the center of an open prairie of marsh grass, an isolated giant, its gnarled limbs threatening and spectral.

We spent the whole morning piss anting the washouts along the edge of the pavement. The slope of the shoulder was steep and difficult and we clambered up and down with monotonous patience. About an hour after Bean Time the Captain's black and yellow Chevrolet drove up. He got out and sauntered towards Boss Godfrey, a pistol stuck in his belt over his stomach, one hand in his pocket, jingling his change.

The Walking Boss yelled out for all of us to line up close together in the bottom of the ditch. Puzzled, we did as we were told, taking off our caps in acknowledgment of the Captain's presence, leaning on the handles of our shovels. We looked at each other, at the shotgun guards who had moved in close, at the Walking Boss and the Captain standing there on the edge of the road staring down at us with their hands on their hips.

Then the Captain turned and waved. Two trustees got out of the Chewie and came forward carrying tools. Between them, wearing handcuffs and brand new convict clothes, walked Cool Hand Luke.

We stared. Some of us cursed under our breaths. Some men shut their eyes while others hung their heads. They made Luke stand on the edge of the road while the trustees knelt down and began to rivet a pair of shackles on his

ankles. Luke stood facing us, motionless and inscrutable while the hammers were tapping at his heels. And after the trustees finished putting on the shackles, to our confoundment, they began to put on a second pair.

When the trustees were finished they stepped aside. The Captain unlocked the handcuffs and put them in his hip pocket. There was a pause and then he stepped behind Luke's back, pulled the pistol from his belt and brought the barrel right down on his head. Luke fell forward, face down in the dirt, his hobbled legs kicking and squirming. The Captain growled to the trustees and they pulled Luke to his knees, each one holding him by an outstretched arm.

Three times the pistol cracked on his skull as blood spurted over his face and neck and dripped from his lolling head onto the sand. Impulsively some of us shifted forward but the guards aimed their shotguns right at us, their fingers on the triggers. Grabbing Luke by the hair and snatching his head backwards, the Captain punched him in the face with his other hand. Grunting and panting, he struck again and again, cursing through clenched teeth.

"You son of a bitch you! You shit eatin' mother fucker! You run one time and you got yourself a set of chains. Huh? You done run twice and now you got two sets of chains. Don't try to git yourself a third set. Huh? You hear? Ah'm warnin' yuh! You'd better git your god damn mind right! Git it right. Or else!"

With a final blow, Luke's head was flung forward. He hung there by the arms, limp, sagging, held up by the trustees who turned their faces with sickened grimaces, unable to look at him, unable to look at each other. And we stood there staring up at Cool Hand's body that was crucified against the sky, his bleeding head bowed toward us.

Behind him stood Boss Godfrey, his black hat outlined on the cloudy heavens beyond, his mirrored glasses catching

the full rays of the sun and reflecting them down upon us, the eyes of the Walking Boss becoming two balls of blinding celestial fire.

At a grunted command, the trustees dropped Luke forward, face down in the dirt. The Walking Boss kicked him in the ribs and thighs and sent him whirling down the slope towards us, spinning in a whirl of rattling chains, a cloud of dust and a spatter of gore to come to rest in an anguished heap at our feet. Then he growled down at us, his voice deep and gritted with menace.

"All right. There he is. There's your Cool Hand Luke. If you all don't want to end up just like him, you'd *all* better git your minds right. Ah mean *right!* Rabbit! Go fetch a bucket of water and throw it on this smart-ass bastard. And git another shovel from the tool truck. A new one."

No one knows how Luke finished out the day. One of his eyes was completely shut, his lips swollen and cut, his nose out of shape. Blood came from everywhere, making his face a hideous red mask, his hair a red knitted helmet that soon turned to mud in the flying dust, finally congealing in the heat of the sun into a hard black crust.

Dragline muttered and swore at the rest of us.

"Aw right. Let's git with it. Let's git *mad* at it."

And the dirt flew. No longer did we crawl up and down the slope. Grunting and sweating, we pitched the dirt, the clumps arcing up in fast, neat accurate projectiles that exploded at the feet of the two Chain Men on top who brushed down the dirt with the edge of their shovels. Luke made nominal motions, weakly throwing the dirt as far up the slope as he could.

Rabbit brought around the water bucket for a drink. As Luke raised the dipper to his bruised mouth Rabbit murmured to him encouragingly, his lips in a straight line, unmoving.

"We're with ya boy. Take it easy now. It's three thirty.

You got about three hours more. But you'll make it. I sneaked some aspirins into the dipper. Swallow 'em down. But don't let on. Or the Man'll have my ass."

Once Luke stumbled and fell to his knees, feebly shaking his head with confusion. Boss Godfrey started towards him, grasping his Walking Stick stiffly. But under the encouragement and the command of our hissed warnings, Luke managed to stand up again and start moving.

At last we loaded up into the truck and started back to Camp, making a mattress on the floor with our shirts and jackets, laying Luke on his back and propping up his head, putting a cigarette into his mouth. There wasn't anymore we could do until we got in except to sit there and keep hoping they wouldn't put him in the Box. But they didn't, allowing us to clean him up so that he wouldn't be an embarrassing spectacle to the Free World traffic on the highways.

First we led him into the shower by the hand and bathed him like a baby. Then Dragline and Koko worked on him all evening. And so did Carr, who revealed a hidden tenderness in the delicate way he used his own scissors and razor to carefully shave away the hair from Luke's head and doctor the wounds. Other men dug into their lockers and found a leather chain harness that would fit around his calves. Koko massaged his neck and shoulders. Carr got him some more aspirins and carefully taped his broken nose.

Then his one good eye glanced at the men gathered around him and his swollen, grotesque mouth feebly tried to smile.

"Whattaya say, boys? What's new?"

His lips opening just enough for the words to come out, he managed to tell *us* what was new. For one thing he had just spent three months in a county jail awaiting trial. After that he was sent up to Raiford and reprocessed just like any other Newcock. Now he had a new serial number. And he

had a new sentence — three more years for stealing the woman's car and her groceries during his first escape. And for breaking and entering and stealing some Free World clothes during his last escape — ten more years.

We were silent. But Luke didn't seem the least upset, bearing the weight of his Time with absolute cheer. Then someone tried to change the subject. What we really wanted to hear were the details of his adventures. We wanted to know how he got away and how he beat the dogs. Where did he hide out and how did he make a living out in the Free World? How many girls did he lay? What capers did he pull? And how did he finally get knocked off?

Slowly he began murmuring the story, pausing for a swallow of Pepsi Cola and a drag on his cigarette. He told us how he swiped a horse out of the farm yard where he had cut his chain with an axe, riding him bareback for a couple of miles and then letting him go, jumping on a freight train that had stopped for water and riding it until dawn. Just before daylight he broke into a garage and cut off his shackle rings with a hacksaw. He found a razor, a pair of overalls and a welder's cap in the men's room where he shaved and washed up and changed clothes. Dressed as a mechanic he hitched rides back to Alabama and managed to sneak home. His brother gave him some money and bought him a ticket on the Greyhound bus. After making a short, surreptitious visit to his mother's grave, he went to New Orleans where he changed his name and got a job on the outskirts of town as a plumber's helper. And that's where he stayed, living quietly and playing it cool.

Koko became agitated, his fingers trembling as he held the Movie Magazine, glancing down at the cover.

"Aw, come on, Luke. Tell us the rest of it. How about all them broads? And them big scores you made?"

"I didn't make no scores, old buddy. What do you think I am? A no-count, rotten, god damn international jewel thief

like you?"

Koko grinned, blinking his eyes with embarrassed pride. Then Dragline interrupted.

"Well, what about all them broads? Tell us about all that real fine pussy you made out wif. You didn't eat it all up did yuh? Ah mean, there's still some left out there for us, ain't there?"

"Oh, lover boy. I don't know what I'm gonna do with you. I didn't even get laid, Drag. I didn't have time. I didn't have no money. I had to get some decent clothes and pay rent and buy groceries. Groceries? Oh damn, I almost ate myself right into bankruptcy every single week."

Koko hooked his right hand into a stiffened claw, shaking it as though it were hot, his big lips pouted in disappointment.

"You didn't get *laid?* You didn't even get *laid?*"

"Well, no. I tried. There was this waitress gal that worked where I used to eat all the time. I took her out to a picture show a couple times and sat on the porch swing with her after work. We smooched it up a little bit, yeah. But I couldn't do no more than play stinky finger."

"What? You? She turned you down? A good lookin' son of a bitch like you? Why I could kiss you myself."

"Well, thank you, sweetheart. But my looks didn't cut no ice with her. She was lookin' to get married. Settle down. All like that there. And I didn't have a dime. And there was a couple guys kept hangin' round who had brand new shiny cars. So, you know."

"Aw Luke. Come on. Tell us the way you ought to. Loosen up a little bit. Let yourself go."

"Why Koko, baby. I'm surprised at you. You know I never tell anything except what God loves. And that's the Truth."

"Aw, to hell with that stuff. Come on, Luke. We don't wanna hear about all them two bit troubles. Tell us the way

it was *supposed* to be. That's what we wanna know. How do you expect us to make plans for when we get out?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Koko. It's a hard world out there. It just is, that's all."

"Well, how about this. How about *The Picture*?"

Luke opened up the magazine and smiled.

"Oh, that. I thought you boys might be havin' the Black Ass back here. And maybe you'd miss your old buddy Cool Hand. So I thought I'd send you this little old snapshot to kind of cheer you all up. All together that damn thing cost me about a week's pay."

How had he been caught? He was a bit reluctant to discuss it but apparently the waitress' rejection was harder to take than he would admit. He continued to woo her but she kept playing hard to get. Again he began drinking, habitually and heavily. Then in swift strokes of calamity, in less than one week, he lost his job, the girl refused to talk to him, he went broke and then landed in jail.

He was down in the French Quarter one night, roaring drunk when a cop approached him down the sidewalk, swinging his club. Luke went berserk. With a scream he took a swing at the cop, kicking at him, knocking him down and rolling with him into the gutter. Civilian bystanders subdued him with difficulty, pulling him off the patrolman and holding him until the wagon arrived.

He was given thirty days. But at the City Stockade they took his fingerprints and sent them in to the FBI in Washington for a routine check. When they found out who he was they suspended the rest of his sentence. But they extradited him back to Florida immediately.

So that was it. We hung our heads, angry and disappointed. The First Bell rang and we prepared ourselves for bed, stretching out for a restless night of grappling with our visions. Luke had been recaptured, put in chains and thrown right back into the ditch with the rest of us. And

then quite calmly he had told us that there was really no other world but this.

Out on the Road the next day we went to work as we always did. But before Smoking Period came around Boss Godfrey walked right up to Luke.

“What were you lookin’ at that there car for?”

“What car, Boss?”

“Don’t you sass me! You hear? Didn’t the Cap’n tell you to git your mind right?”

With a whistling cut he brought his Walking Stick down sharply on Luke’s head. Luke bent over, dropping his shovel and groaning with pain.

“Did you say somethin’ Luke? Huh? Answer me, damn it!”

Again the Stick came down, blood spurting from reopened cuts, new bruises beginning to appear on his shaven white skull. The rest of us kept right on shoveling, our heads bowed, our eyes on the ground.

“Now pick up that shovel and git back to work. Ah ain’t gonna put up with your fuckin’ off no more. You hear?”

That night they put him in the Box. After that the same procedure was followed every day. For no reason at all he was beaten and if there were moans or tears he was hit again. But if Luke made no outcry he was struck anyway for not answering promptly. Luke got weaker. He was barely able to finish out each day, his heavily shackled feet dragging in the dust. Every night he was denied his supper and locked up in the Box.

Again his beard grew. His body and clothes became filthy, his head encrusted with dried blood, his shaved and sunburned scalp a solid mass of bruises and cuts. But on the third night, from out of the darkness and from out of the depths of his wooden tomb, we could hear Luke singing that old mountain song called Little Liza Jane. We lay in

our bunks listening, his voice making us tingle all over.

Every morning, five minutes before the First Bell and just after the other Chain Men had already been awakened, the door to the Building was opened and they brought in Luke in his nightshirt, holding his clothes heaped in his arms, his unsupported shackles dragging across the floor. There was no time to shave or take a shower. He barely had time to go through the complicated maneuvers of putting on his pants over his chains and fixing up his rig of harness and strings before the Second Bell.

Then the week was over. Luke had made it. Even if they kept him in the Box all weekend at least he would have a chance to rest. And on Saturday morning they brought him into the Messhall and let him eat his breakfast.

But afterwards the Yard Man was waiting for him just outside the Messhall door. He took him over to the corner of the fence in front of the gun platform. Boss Paul was on guard and smiling. Boss Godfrey was there with his Walking Stick. A shovel stood leaning against the fence.

There was a long pause. No one said anything. Then Boss Godfrey strolled forward and with the point of his Stick he drew two long parallel lines on the ground. Turning to Cool Hand he jabbed at the ground with his cane.

“Luke? You see that ditch? That’s mah ditch. You see that dirt? That’s your dirt. Now git you gawd damn dirt outta mah ditch!”

And with that Boss Godfrey brought his Stick down hard on Luke’s head. Jaws flexing and eyes watering, he staggered over without a word, took the shovel and began digging, hard, steadily, without looking up at any of the Free Men who stood there watching him.

Later the Yard Man and Boss Godfrey walked off and left Luke working under the smile of Boss Paul. We also watched, from the windows and from the porch, in silence and in wonder.

By the time the morning was half gone Luke had dug a ditch that was twenty-five feet long, three feet wide and three feet deep. Then the Yard Man entered the gate and walked over to Luke, looking down at him with a sneer, nervously slapping a grubbing hoe handle against the calf of his leg.

"Luke? What in the hell are you doin'?"

"I'm diggin' this here ditch, Boss."

"Who tole you to put that dirt in mah yard?"

"Boss Godfrey did. He said to git it outta his ditch."

With a swift backhand movement the Yard Man hit Luke a blow that knocked him over sprawling, leaning on the edge of the ditch for support, blood trickling down over his forehead.

"Don't lie to me. Nobody tole you no such a gawd damn thing! Now git that fuckin' dirt off'n mah grass!"

Weakly Luke clambered out of the ditch and began to shovel the pile of dirt back into the excavation. Once more the handle swung, whistling as it cut the air and whacked squarely across Luke's buttocks.

"Hurry up! Roll, damn you! Let's see you roll!"

And then, from out of the depths of the Building, a harmonica began playing softly, thoughtfully, with sadness and resignation. Dragline was sitting on the floor hunched over his crossed legs and playing an old country church hymn. Koko's guitar joined in with muted chords. Society Red sat on one of the commodes and jiggled his string up and down, making music the only way he knew how, by rattling his chain in a slow rhythm against the concrete floor. Blackie sat down beside him and did the same. Then Stupid Blondie, Four Eyed Joe and Gator began to sing in whining, nasal voices. Then all of us, those not knowing the words trying to hum it in the background.

At noon Boss Paul told Luke to go inside the Messhall

and eat. Quickly he wolfed down three enormous platefuls of beans and two big bricks of corn bread dipped in cutback molasses. Throughout the meal the Dog Boy stood behind him and sneered.

"Eat plenty, Double Gut. You probably won't git nothin' at all tonight. Eat up, you fuckin' hog. Stretch that hog belly real good."

When he finished Luke went out in the yard, washed his spoon and put it in his hip pocket. Getting down on his knees he wet his face and head under the faucet and then went back to work. He had almost finished filling the ditch when Boss Godfrey came through the gate with his Walking Stick and stood behind him for several minutes, silently watching him work. Again the hymn resounded from the Building, quietly and fearfully.

With a loud whack we heard the Stick land on Luke's head. He fell flat on his stomach, his fingers gripping the earth spasmodically, digging into it with trembling agony.

"Luke. Ah done tole you to git your dirt outta mah ditch. Didn't ah? Didn't ah Luke?"

"Yes sir, Boss."

"So how come you ain't done it yet? How come?"

"I don't know, Boss."

"You don't know. You don't *know?* Well, you damn well better figure it out. And quick. Now git up on yore feet and git to work."

Again Luke rose and started digging. Again we played and we rattled and we sang. Once more the ditch was dug and then filled up with curses and blows from the Yard Man. Just before supper time, when all of us were lined up waiting in front of the Messhall door, the Yard Man came inside and took Luke down to the Box.

Sunday was the same thing. Luke dug. The Free Men hit him and we sang and we played. But at three in the

afternoon Luke fell to his knees in front of Boss Godfrey, moaning and choking in a beseeching sob.

"Don't hit me no more, Boss! Please! Don't hit me no more! I'll do whatever you say. Just don't hit me no more."

The music stopped. Boss Paul smiled. The faintest trace of a grin moved at the corners of Boss Godfrey's lips. Bending over, he spoke quietly, anxiously, almost with tender concern.

"Have you got your mind right, Luke?"

"Yes sir, Boss. I got it right. I got it right."

"Are you sure, Luke? You ain't gonna backslide on me are yuh? You sure your mind's right?"

"Yes suh, Boss. Please. Please don't hit me no more!"

"All right Luke. All right. Ah won't hit you no more."

The Building was silent.

25

THE WALKING BOSS TOLD LUKE TO FINISH filling in the ditch and leveling off the dirt in the yard, standing nearby as he worked, leaning on his cane and watching. When Luke finished he stood there, waiting for instructions. The Walking Boss didn't move. For a full minute we sat inside the Building and waited.

"Are you through, Luke?"

"Yes suh, Boss. I'm through."

"Are you tired, Luke?"

"Yes suh. I am. I'm mighty tired."

"All right then. Go on inside the Building. Take a hot shower and shave yourself up. Go to bed and git some sleep. As long as you got your mind right there ain't no reason why you cain't eat and sleep like everybody else."

"I got it right, Boss. I got it right."

"That's good Luke. Ah'm really mighty glad to hear that."

After that day they let Luke sleep in the Building with the rest of us and they let him have his meals. He was no longer beaten or abused and even the Dog Boy got the point and began to keep his mouth shut. Luke's wounds began to scab over and heal. His swollen lips went back to normal, his eye opened up and gradually faded. His hair grew out again, forming a ragged-looking crew cut spotted with bald places made by the scars. His hands hardened and his skin grew dark. The bridge of his nose mended with only a slight crook in it. He gained weight. His appetite rose to what it was during his Newcock days and his speed and endurance, his energy and strength resumed their legendary proportions.

But there was a difference. Luke no longer laughed and joked. He never sat in on the poker games. After he took a shower in the evenings he went straight to bed, looking off at nothing, silent and brooding. On weekends he would sometimes play his banjo but the music was different. There were no more of the virtuoso pieces, none of the Talking Blues. His repertory had been reduced to the plaintive and cajoling spirituals of the mountains, songs of humility, of regret and fatigue.

For Luke had been broken. His mind was right. His working partners tried to carry on as they had always done before, telling lies and exchanging insults, making phony bets and playing the Dozens. And none of the rest of us would have dared to make any comments on the changes in Luke. But even with Drag and Koko there was a difference. It just couldn't be helped.

One day in the middle of January, Boss Godfrey was strolling up and down the road as we were pitching up dirt to the washouts. Cool Hand exercised his prerogative as a Chain Man, brushing down the clumps as they were tossed up from the ditch bottom. Boss Godfrey stood nearby, smoking a cigar and leaning on his Stick. Without shifting his weight or changing his expression, he began to growl in a low, matter-of-fact voice —

"Luke. Go get the water bucket."

Cool Hand glanced up. Then he stabbed his shovel in the ground and without hesitation he called out —

"Boss Paul! Gettin' the water bucket over yonder!"

For a moment there was no answer. The guards saw the Walking Boss standing beside Luke and knew it must have been his idea. But it was too much. Luke had been made a Water Jack? Cool Hand Luke?

"Boss Hughes! Boss Brown! Gittin' the bucket here."

"Yeah. Yeah. OK. Git it."

Luke started down the road, his feet moving with that pigeon-toed, short-stepped gait as he hobbled towards the tool truck. The guards watched him closely but Boss Godfrey turned and idly strolled up the road in the opposite direction.

Luke got the bucket and lugged it back, offering the first drink to the Walking Boss, looking down at the ground and waiting while Boss Godfrey gingerly sipped from the dipper.

"Better give the guards a drink, Luke."

Luke started clambering down the shoulder of the road, across the ditch and up the back slope, pausing to call out in a clear, distinct voice,

"Boss Brown! Bringin' the bucket over to you, Boss!"

He moved closer. The guard flinched, drew nearer, hesitated. He swung his shotgun down from his shoulder and got a tight grip on it, hitched the pistol holster forward. Then he slowly reached out and took the dipper, looking right into Luke's face. Luke stood there without moving, patiently holding the bucket.

After the Free Men the whole squad was served a drink. And after that day, if Rabbit and Jim were busy doing something else, Luke was often sent for the water bucket. He was even sent ahead of the Bull Gang to move up the red warning flag as we advanced along the road.

At first we were flabbergasted that Boss Godfrey should let him go that far off without holding his rifle on him. Then we thought that *two* sets of chains would surely make a difference. But we were forced to admit that there were other reasons. There was an entirely different attitude in Luke's behavior. He was even becoming obsequious to the Free Men; agreeing with their opinions, laughing when they laughed, walking and talking in such a way as to admit that he was merely a stupid country boy who only got into trouble because he didn't have good sense. And if they

made any references to his former escapes and rebellions he began to whine out a feeble excuse, shuffling his feet on the ground with embarrassed humility.

One morning Boss Godfrey strolled over.

"Luke. Ah'm gonna make you a Jack. But you'll have to keep them chains on though. Ah asked the Captain to take 'em off but he said no. But ah told him you were gonna jack for me anyhow. But hear me out, Luke. If you ever run from me again ah'm gonna kill you. You hear me? Ah'll kill you dead."

We had to turn our heads when we heard Luke saying,

"Don't worry Boss. I ain't gonna run no more. I done got my mind right."

A gloom hung over the whole camp, a despair, a lack of the lustiness and the gaiety of former times. We knew what had happened. The Free Men's revenge for the night of July the Fourth was now complete. They had captured and chained and punished the culprits. They had broken them down in order to prove to the rest of us what would be the inevitable results of defiance. Then they had taken the greatest rebel of them all and rewarded him to show us the fruits of obedience. And just for good measure they even began to use Dragline as a part-time Jack — even though he had just had his parole turned down flat. The Parole Board said that his record had too many former arrests for drunkenness, assault and disorderly conduct; too many bad character references such as the one written up by the detectives in Miami who had investigated his case.

So when it happened no one was prepared for it. No one at all. It was a cool, dreary Monday afternoon. We were totally immersed in our labor and in our fantasies. Dimly we were aware that Dragline was sharpening tools on the edge of the road beside the tool truck and that Luke was carrying back the water bucket after giving us all a drink. Rabbit was down the road carrying up the red flag. Jim the

Trustee was goofing off, shooting the bull with Boss Brown.

Suddenly there was the start of a motor, a roar, a prolonged, clattering crash, shouts and curses and the firing of guns. We dropped our tools and dove face down in the ditch as a frantic barrage of pistols and shotguns went off all around us.

Luke and Dragline had leaped into the tool truck, started the motor and driven off, pulling the lever which raises the dump body and spilling out on the road behind them a littered trail of crashing shovels, yo-yos, bush axes, water barrels, tarps, lunch buckets, bean pot, bread box, the whole god damned works.

Boss Godfrey didn't move. He just stood there, leaning on his Walking Stick.

But the guards went hysterical, letting go with everything they had, their pumpguns booming until they were empty and then their pistols cracking out until the hammers clicked on dead cartridge cases in the cylinders. Bullets whined and whizzed, lead thudding out an entertaining melody against the body of the truck which had been raised up as a thick metal shield.

The moment of fury stopped abruptly when all the guards ran out of ammunition. They stood there awkwardly, looking down at us, shifting their weight from one foot to another. Every one of us could have stood up and strolled away. Except that we couldn't move. We lay there flat on our bellies, laughing so hard we couldn't get off the ground, burying our faces in our folded arms to muffle our hilarity.

For we realized that what Luke had really done was to put the Slow Con on all the Free Men. He couldn't possibly beat them in any other way so he simply had played it cool. Now he and Dragline were off in an aureole of flames, a tremendous din echoing behind them; laughter, curses and screamed invectives raised up in a mixed chorus of soaring

halleluiahs —

“They’re in the truck!”

“They’re gettin’ away!”

“It’s that fat son of a bitch, Dragline!”

“And Cool Hand Luke!”

26

TODAY AT BEAN TIME I LAY THERE IN THE church yard, listening to the drone of Dragline's voice, my head propped up on my shoes, the bowl of my pipe resting on my chest. Something made my ankle itch and I drew up my leg, reaching down to scratch. As I relaxed again I turned my head and looked at the watch tower, studying its complicated design of criss-crossed beams and girders that supported the little square house on top. For no reason at all I began to count the flights of steps that zigzagged up into the sky. Fifteen. There were fifteen ladders. Like those that go from the boat deck up to the wing of the bridge. And for a moment I let myself remember. Right then the twelve-to-four would be on watch. The Captain and the Mates would be in the chart room working up the noon position. The sky would be clear, the seas moderate, the ship rolling and pitching gently.

They were still singing inside the church, a long, moaning kind of melodic prayer. There would be a pause for a minute or two and then they would begin again, one of the instruments or singers starting off alone, the others joining in one at a time. Stupid Blondie had finished sharpening yo-yos. The traffic on the road went by. Tobacco can lids were popped open. The dipper hit against the rim of the bucket. Matches were struck. A chain rattled.

Dragline drew one knee up against his chest, his other leg bent sideways, his ankles crossed. He leaned one arm on his upraised knee, holding a cigarette, his other hand picking up some sand and letting it fall through his fingers. Hoarsely he murmured to the Bull Gang sprawled all around him, occasionally glancing over at the Free Men to see if they were listening. He squinted his eyes, his loose

lips trying to conceal his grin.

“Ah’m tellin’ yuh. There was *some* hell raised when me and Luke took off. Ah ain’t never heard such a noise. Bullets were whizzin’ and moanin’ and groanin’ all over the place. They was poundin’ away on the back of that old truck like — oh, man. Ah’m tellin’ yuh. It was hell on wheels.”

“But that there Luke. He was a smart bastard aw right. Yuh see. Them Free Men couldn’t even chase us cause Luke had the keys to the cage truck in his pocket. And it was a half mile at least to the first house where they could git to a telephone and call the Law. Even so. Luke wasn’t takin’ no chances. We didn’t want to go git ourselves spotted, see? Drivin’ around in no State truck. And we didn’t wont nobody to find the truck on some back road somewheres so they’d know right where to put the dogs out. The idea was, we was gonna hide it, see? Ah mean that truck was *hot.* So Luke drove off on some little old dirt road, and then he put it in low-low gear and we went through some groves. ‘Cept he made me git out and come along behind with a shovel. And ah had to cover up the tire tracks. Then we run it right into this patch of palmettos and he made me start cuttin’ off fronds with this bush axe. Like ah said. He was a *smart* son of a bitch. He dumped all the gawd damn tools out there on the road, see? All but *one* shovel and *one* bush axe. He had *them* in the cab. And the tool file. Cause he knew we’d need ‘em. Anyhow. We cut all these here palmetto fronds and bushes and covered up this here mother fuckin’ truck. So nobody could find it easy. Less’n they jes plain fell over it in the dark.”

“Still. That son of a bitch wasn’t satisfied. Oh, hell no. We gotta drain some gasoline outta the truck and soak our shoes in it. And the bottoms of our pant legs. Cause Luke didn’t wont the dogs to have our scent even if they *did* find the truck. How ‘bout that? Ah mean, that’s playin’ it cool, now ain’t it?”

“So we got away clean. We’re out there in the woods. We beat the gun and we beat the dogs both. And Luke. Like he ain’t never built a day of Time in his life, he’s startin’ to cut the fool. He’s out there whistlin’ and grinnin’ and he says to me, he says, ‘Listen, you stupid bastard. Don’t you go lightin’ no matches now. You’ll give us a hot foot that won’t wait. We’ll go straight to Glory like the Fourth of July’. But ah jes grinned back at him and ah says, ‘Listen. Don’t call me by none of yore gawd damn family names. Ah might jes be forced to knock yore funny lookin’ haid off. Haw! You call that thing a haid? It looks like an onion what fell off a truck goin’ down Route 301 at sixty miles an hour’.”

“Then Luke says, ‘You think you’re real bad. Dontcha Fat Boy?’ And ah says, ‘Naw, ah ain’t bad. Ah’m jes a little bitter that’s all. Like a lemon. So’s you can suck me’.”

Dragline squatted there in the sand of the church yard. Idly he reached down and grasped the center link of his chain, rubbing it between his fingers, feeling how thin it had become in the past year. And yet he was thinking of something else, smiling and remembering. Then he began murmuring again, resuming his story.

He and Luke went through the woods, laughing and joking. When they found a comfortable spot beneath a large tree they sat down and had their supper; a half-dozen oranges picked in a grove and two bars of peanut brittle they had put away in their pockets for the occasion. Then Dragline went to work on Luke’s shackles with the big file from the tool truck, filing off the rivet heads and spreading open the rings. Grinning, Luke massaged his calves and ankles, stood up and walked around in a circle, taking long, gigantic steps. Picking up the leather straps and strings and both sets of chains he drew back and flung the whole apparatus far off into a palmetto bush.

“Well. Ah’m sure damn glad to get rid of them things.”

Dragline was beside himself with happiness, hopping and

skipping around like a school boy, laughing and giggling and throwing out his arms in wide, jerking, uninhibited gestures.

"We're free! Think o' that, Luke. You son of a bitch! *Free!* We are as of right *now,* as of right this fuckin' minute, sure 'nough, big ass *Free* Men!"

"Not yet we're not. We got to get out of these clothes. And find us some food. We got to find us a place to hide where we can lay low until the heat is off us. And we got to get us some loot."

"You jes let me worry about all that, old buddy. If we can git to mah place in Clewiston we got it made. Clothes, spendin' money — everything. Ah got an uncle that can git us a jug o' shine. And ah knows some gals too. Some nice, big-titted country gals."

"Oh, no. We cain't stick our necks out runnin' around with no broads now, Dragline. Later — yeah. But not now. Besides, the very first place they're gonna look for us is where we live. We got to stay the hell gone from there."

"Man, are you done gone stir-crazy? If ah cain't git me no pussy, what the hell's the sense in me runnin' in the first place? And we ain't got to *stay* at mah place. We'll jes slip in and out real quick-like. At night sometime. Hell, they cain't be hangin' around there *all* the god damn time."

"No. Maybe not. We'll see. I guess we could head on down that way in any case. We got to go somewheres."

They knew where they were and had no trouble finding the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad tracks which would lead them to the Tampa area and then beyond. After walking a mile or so through the woods they reached the roadbed and waited until dark before continuing south. They were certain they had made a clean getaway but Luke was taking no chances. Every five minutes or so he would stop and listen for the baying of hounds.

All night they walked, stumbling along the ties and the

ballast. Once they heard a train approaching and got off the tracks, crouching behind some bushes. The headlight and the noise of the whistle came closer. When the engine roared past they began running for all they were worth. But the speeding freight cars went whistling past them in a dim and shadowy blur. They were forced to give up, standing there with heaving chests and gasping breaths, watching the red lights of the rear end of the caboose gradually disappearing.

They kept on walking. They reached a water tower and decided to wait there for another train. But it began to get cold. It was in the middle of February and a light frost was forming on the ground. They put their hands in their pockets and buttoned up their collars. Dragline wanted to build a fire but Luke wouldn't permit it. After a few hours they heard a train approaching pulled by a diesel locomotive. It was heading north but by this time they didn't care about the direction. They crouched down, all set for the sprint, listening to the approaching roar. But it turned out to be the Silver Meteor flashing by at a speed impossible to catch.

They continued on in silence. It became colder. They began to shiver, alternately walking and then jogging beside the tracks, the rails shining in the moonlight and leading them onward.

Later they saw a frame house just off the roadbed beside an open, cultivated field. Two large chinaberry trees in the yard were casting deep black shadows beneath the foliage. The fugitives crept into this shade, examining the house, looking at the clothing hanging on a line behind the rear porch and wondering if any of it would fit them.

Treading carefully, they eased out into the moonlight. But when they drew close to the corner of the porch a large dog suddenly appeared, barking loudly and continuously. They froze. Wondering if they should make a run for it or attempt to snatch the clothes in spite of the dog, they just

stood there, looking into each other's eyes. The dog increased the intensity of its barking until a loud, clear human voice challenged the night from inside the house.

"Aw right. Who's out there?"

Dragline and Luke sucked in their breath. The dog's barking went into a higher pitch. The voice insisted.

"Who's out there? Yo'll better git the hell gone from here. Ah'm tellin' yuh!"

They began to withdraw, not sure if they could be seen from one of the darkened windows or not, muffling their footsteps but moving steadily towards the cover of the chinaberry trees and then out of the shadows and back to the roadbed. After they had reached the tracks and were out of ear shot of the house, Dragline began to stamp his feet and wave his arms.

"Gawd damn them yelpin' bitches! Ah'd a-been a millionaire by now if it warn't fer them gawd damn dawgs. Of all the fuckin' luck. Trains won't slow down. Cain't git no Free World clothes. And it's gittin' to be colder'n a witch's tit out here."

"Well, Drag. You can always go on back to Camp and climb back into your little old bed. I mean, don't forget. This bein' free is damn hard work. I mean, maybe you just ain't cut out for the job."

Sometimes they sat down on the cross-ties and rested. But Luke was always anxious to keep moving. It got colder. They reached an area of citrus groves and could see fires dotted in regular lines out among the dark forms of the rows of trees. They could hear distant voices and the laboring growls of truck motors and transmissions. Gangs of workers were out tending smudge pots put out as a precaution against the fruit being damaged by frost.

Dragline wanted to curl up on the ground next to one of those fires and get some sleep. But Luke was afraid they would be seen and wanted to travel at night and sleep

during the day. Dragline was reluctant but he listened to Luke.

On they went, following the straight, unwavering lines of the railroad tracks that led away into the starry night. But later it started to cloud over. A light, drizzling rain began to fall, catching them in open country where the only trees were small scrub oaks and second growth pine. All they could do was keep on walking, drenched and cold, their teeth chattering, exhausted, starved and miserable.

The drizzle stopped just before daylight. As dawn began to break the railroad track met and began to run parallel with a State highway. The high tension power lines that ran in sagging arcs above the ditch, the marshy ground and their sense of the geography of the area all told them that this was the Rattlesnake Road.

Sure enough. The tracks and the road led them past the fish camp on the creek and then the railroad began to bear to the right in a long curve which took them over a wooden trestle and then across a drawbridge. Cautiously they crept past the bridgetender's tower and went on behind the ramshackle general store which is in the very apex of the diverging highway and tracks.

It was daylight. They walked past the scattered collection of Negro shacks that formed an unincorporated community which didn't even have a name. Over to the left, rising out of the mists and the early morning shadows they could see the lookout tower of the forest rangers. Around them they could hear cars starting off for work and voices in the cabins and shacks.

And then Luke remembered the church. It was Tuesday. No one would be coming in. They could spend the day undisturbed, sheltered from the weather and shielded from the eyes of the Free World, getting some sleep and resting until nightfall when they would again resume their escape.

Leaving the railroad embankment, they began walking

through the high brown grass and weeds covered with frost and dew that wet their shoes and pant legs up to their knees. They dodged among the scattered scrub oaks and came up behind the outhouse, making sure there was no one around and that the church was really empty. They skirted the rusty pump in the backyard, careful not to make any noise by stepping on the trash, the collection of tin cans, paper and bottles. At the rear of the church and to the side, a small addition had been built, crudely constructed out of bare cement blocks, the joints rough and out of line. There was a back door to this addition. And they found the door unlocked. They went inside, looking around at the rows of chairs, the pulpit, the piano. After they investigated a side room that had a few chairs and a mirror, a pile of collection baskets, a big jar of water and some plastic glasses on top of a table, they slowly let out their breath. Dragline went over to flop down on a chair, Luke smiling and pouring himself some water from the jar.

"Well, Fat Boy. So far, so good, I reckon."

Dragline sprawled out, his legs straight with the backs of his heels on the floor. Folding his arms over his belly, he let out a moan.

"Damn it. Wish ah had me some beans. Grits. Corn bread. Anything ah could chew up and swallow. Ah sure did think we were gonna be in Tampa by this time. Ridin' in on a fast freight. In real style."

"What do you mean, *chew,* Drag? Without no teeth, about the best you could ever do is *gum.*"

"Aw right. Chew. Gum. Tongue. Lick. Swallow in one whole piece, alive and kickin'. Ah don't care. Ah'm *hongry*. Hey. What are you doin'?"

"Just lookin' around."

"Well cut it out and let's git some rest. You shouldn't be prowlin' around nobody's church. Even if it is a nigger church. After all. Ah mean, we can rest up here and hide

out a while. Nobody'd care about that. But we ain't got no call to be snoopin'."

"I'm jest lookin'. I ain't hurtin' nothin'."

Today in the church yard as Dragline was telling the story, I tamped the ashes and the tobacco of my pipe down into the bowl with my finger. Then I took a deep drag, slowly letting the smoke out between my lips. I stared at the old church, at the wall and the windows, trying to visualize what it looked like inside, trying to see what Cool Hand Luke had seen that morning as he quietly walked among the chairs and along the walls, occasionally taking a careful peek outside from around the edge of the window.

But the way Dragline told it was like this:

"He kept right on. No matter whut ah said didn't make no never mind to him. He keeps grinnin' to hisself and keeps wanderin' around in there. Oh, man. He's gotta git into everythin'. He's pickin' up prayer books. He picks up one of these here fans layin' on a chair. They're made outta cardboard. Some funeral parlor outfit hands 'em out. Some picture of a saint or a apostle or somethin' on one side and the name of the funeral parlor is printed on the other side. So this fan belongs to some nigger what lives around here. But he's got his name printed on the handle in pencil. But ole Luke, he ain't satisfied. Oh, hell no. He's gotta *read* this here name. Like maybe he might know the guy."

"Then he goes up and down the chairs. You know the kind they got. Yuh cain't see 'em from here but hell, they must have seventy or eighty. Made outta wicker and stuff. But ah'll give them ole niggers credit for one thing though. Every damn one of them chairs has got a white cloth over the back. And ah mean they is *clean.* Like some mammy must wash them things ever' week. Throw 'em in a black iron kettle in the backyard and boil the piss out of 'em."

"Anyhow. Luke's makin' like he's *countin'* these chairs. Then he looks at this one up front what's got arm rests.

That there's for the preacher. And then behind that is four, five more. These here is for the singin' choir. That's probably them in there right now. Singin' and moanin' away like heaven jes won't wait."

"So ole Cool Hand, he goes over to this beat up ole pianer and he plays with these phony wax flowers. And there's a glass candlestick from some dime store. But Luke finds some number ten still stamped on it nobody never washed off. Big deal. So it costs a dime? But Luke figgers that's really somethin'. Must have. Way he keeps lookin' at it. Then he plays with the pianer keys. Course half the ivory is gone off'n it. And underneath is ole wood and somebody wrote numbers on it. Tryin' to do it by the numbers, ah reckon."

"And over the front door is this picture of Lord Jesus somebody got off'n a calendar. And an electric clock on the wall that cain't work. And the paint is peelin' off'n the ceilin'. Cobwebs and fly shit all around. Oh. And the fuckin' floor is painted blue. Yeah. Ah remember that floor. Real dark blue."

"Up front they got a stand somebody nailed together. That thing holds up this big Bible. Lick-lick. Lickturn or somethin'. Anyhow. There's a big tablecloth over it and then this here big ole Bible."

"But ah'm lookin' over this big stove out in the middle of the room. Ah'm layin' down on the floor, tryin' to git me some rest. But ah'm rolled over and ah'm lookin' at this thing thinkin' o' how warm ah could be. Regular ole country stove. Big iron thing and there's a pile of kindlin' there too and ole newspapers. But naw. Luke don't wont to take no chances on smoke. But all of a sudden ah hears him start talkin'. At first ah figgers he's talkin' to hisself but then he says — 'Hey, Mister Lord!'"

"Damn. Ah spins around and there he is, standin' up there like a preacher, bof' arms leanin' out on bof' sides of

the Bible. You know how preachers always stand there. And real deep and loud, like he's givin' the whole fuckin' world a hell-fire sermon, this crazy Luke starts *preachin'*. But he's preachin' straight to *God* though. He looks straight up at the ceilin' over his haid and he says — 'Hey up there, Mister Lord! How you doin' up there?'"

"Jes like that. How you doin'? Like he's the old man what lives next door maybe. Well, man, ah'm tellin' yuh. Ah comes straight off'n that floor like a Jack-in-the-box jes a-lookin' at that crazy son of a bitch. Hell, ah ain't cold no more and ah ain't hongry neither. Ah'm jest scared that's all. So ah says — 'Hey Luke! What are you *do*in'?'"

"But he don't pay me no mind. He jest looks up at the ceilin' and goes on prayin' or rantin' or whatever it was he was doin'."

"'Listen here, Lord. Hear me out a minute. I got a bone to pick with you, Old Man.' And then ah says — 'Luke! *Luke!* You're takin' the Lord's name in *vain!* Ah' mean. That there's a mortal *sin.* Man. That's *blasphemy*!'. An' he wen' on, 'Oh, yeah? Well, Drag. Ah'm a pretty evil feller already. You know that. Hell, everybody knows that. Ah mean ah done killed people and stole real money and everything'."

"An' ah says — 'Aw, come on Luke. Don't do that. Dummy up and lay down here awhile. Let's rest up some. Come on now'."

"Cool Hand keeps on talkin'. Ain't nothin' gonna shut him up. And he's shakin' his fists in the air and his face is all screwed up like he's hurtin'. Hurtin' real bad. And he says — 'Ah mean, Lord. Ah'm a pore, dumb son of a bitch and all like that. But you gotta admit. You sure do make it mighty hard for a man to keep up. How come you're all the time fixin' it up so that ah cain't never win out? Anything ah do, no matter how ah do it, it's all wrong? So that most of the time ah don't even know mahself what's wrong and what ain't?'"

“Well, by this time *ah* don’t even know what *ah’m* doin’ no more. Ah’m crawlin’ across the floor over to Luke. Ah’m practically beggin’ him to shut up. It was jest beginnin’ to git daylight. The sky was all red and there was thick clouds out yonder. And Luke, he’s arguin’ and cussin’ and mad all at once. Ah tries to humor ‘im. Like you gotta do some nut. Ah talks nice and soft to ’im. Real coaxin’ like. Ah says — ‘Please Luke. Come on. Ah don’t like this kind of talk. And God don’t neither. It’s blasphemy! Anybody knows better than that. You’re gonna bring down the wrath of God on yoreself. On you and me both’.”

“But Luke says — ‘The *wrath* of God? Ah thought God was love, Dragline? You know. Love thy fellow man and all that’.”

“By this time ah’m prayin’. Yeah. Ah mean it. Ah’m down on the floor on mah knees. Now ah ain’t scared o’ nothin’. Nothin’ on this earth. Ah ain’t a-scared o’ man, beast nor the devil. But fuckin’ around with God. Now, that’s different. So ah’m down on the floor, mah hands put together like they taught me in Sunday school. And Luke, he’s still preachin’. And ah’m prayin’.”

“Ah says — ‘Don’t listen to him, Lawd! He’s crazy! He’s outta his pore, misbegotten mind! They done beat on his haid too much, God. He don’t know what he’s sayin’. But don’t punish him. Please. Have pity on us pore convicts. We know we been bad. Real bad. But have mercy anyway. OK.? Is it a deal, Lawd?”

“And Luke, he says — ‘Yeah Lord! Have mercy! Have pity! Cause ah’m a bad one aw right. But then again maybe you *had* better punish me. But good. Cause ah really need it. Ah mean ah done *stole!* Money! Right out of the mouths of pore, hongry municipal governments. And worse yet — ah done killed people. Well, maybe not exactly *people.* But there was fourteen of ‘em. Before ah was even a man. Before ah could even vote. In cold blood. Men ah didn’t even know. And one of ’em even had a Bible in his pocket.

What did you tell *him* about love, God? Or don't you really speak that heathen tongue o' his'n after all? And what about all them starvin' heathen kids and women folk? And them ah wasn't allowed to feed or even talk to cause they was enemies? And how come after ah had to do all this burnin' and killin' they made *me* out somethin' special? Music, speeches, flags, medals? Hell, ah was Good Guy Number One. And how come everywhere ah went ah could always see some man of the cloth hangin' around? Smilin' and grinnin' and salutin'? Wearin' war ribbons and officer's marks and all like that there?'"

"Man. It was too much fer me. Ah couldn't even look no more. Ah jes covered up mah face and ah says — 'Oh, please. Don't lissen to him, Lawd. You cain't hold his sins against a crazy man. Can you Lawd? Ah mean. That ain't fair. He's nuts! His haid is all banged up and scarred. He's had hisself a pretty tough time. But it ain't his fault. Is it? Is it Lawd?'"

"But right then. Right in the middle of this threeway argument we're havin'. Comin' from right outta nowhere, ah hears this voice callin 'out — 'Luke! Dragline! Come on out of there!'."

"Course, ah knew who it was. Boss Godfrey. And ah says to mahself, 'Oh, damn, damn. Lawd he'p us. Boss *Godfrey's* out there.' And then he yells out again — 'Luke! Come on out! This is the end of the line!'."

"Right away ah goes scootin' over to a winder on mah hands and knees and real careful like, ah looks outside. Then ah tears ass over to the other side and looks out. After that ah jes fell flat. Ah jes couldn't look. Ah buries mah haid in mah arms like a gawd damn ostrich does and ah says to Luke — 'Oh damn it, Luke. We're surrounded. They done caught up with us already. *Already!* They's a thousand cops out there. Man, they're crawlin' around behind the bushes and the trees thick as red bugs. And there ain't no way of gittin' outta here."

“But Luke, he didn’t even move. He jes stood there like he was, leanin’ on this table thing, one hand on each side of this Bible. He keeps lookin’ up at the ceilin’. But he ain’t mad no more. All of a sudden his lips is all puckered up. It looked like it was jes about all he could do to keep from bustin’ out loud and laughin’ his ass off.”

“But not me. Ah knew the fix we was in. Ah mean, ah *knew*. And ah tried to tell ‘im. Ah *tried*. Ah says to him — ‘They got all kinds of Law out there, Luke! The Walkin’ Boss. The Captain. Shotgun guards. The Dog Boy. The Sheriff. The Highway Patrol. Oh, damn, damn. What are we gonna do? What can we do?’.”

“But he jest grins. Ah’m tellin’ yuh. He jes grins up at the ceilin’ and he says — ‘Do? Well, Dragline. Ah don’t know. Ah reckon about all we can do right now is jest try and play it cool’.”

“Shit. That was all ah had to hear. ‘Play it cool?,’ ah says. ‘*Cool?* How can we be cool when we’re hotter’n the hinges of hell? They’ll blow our ass clean off if we try anything. They got a natural dead-lock right on us’.”

“But Luke jest stepped down from behind this Bible thing and he walks real slow right up to the winder. The sun was startin’ to shine by then and it was comin’ right in on him. And he raises bof’ his two hands right up in the air and he yells out loud and clear — ‘Aw right, Boss! Don’t shoot! You got us! We give up!’.”

“And right then. He didn’t even aim. He didn’t even hafta shift his rifle around. He jes let it dangle real loose like in his hands. And jes like that, Boss Godfrey pulled the trigger.”

27

THE BULLET HIT LUKE SQUARELY IN THE throat and passed completely through his neck, the force of it nearly knocking him over, making him stagger back several steps to keep his footing. The bullet ricocheted off the stove pipe and then the brick chimney, bouncing back at an angle to hit the ceiling and finally fell on top of the piano keyboard, the dim interior of the church filled with a puff of soot and of brick dust, the thwacking sounds of the bullet forming a single, instantaneous chord that culminated with the sounding of several treble notes on the piano.

Dragline began to crawl in a frenzied scuttle towards some sort of cover. He stumbled and kicked and paddled his way through the mass of cane chairs and then scurried behind the home-made lectern, trying to hide himself in the cramped hollow within.

There was silence. After the noise of the gunshot and the frantic, scrambling sounds, it was like a vacuum; ethereal, delicate, vibrating with a sensation of the infinite.

Dragline cowered behind the lectern, not daring to move, his mouth bitter with the taste of desperation that struggled inside his chest. Hearing nothing but the last faint hum of the piano, he cautiously peered around the edge. And he saw Luke standing there in the same place, the floor strewn with tiny glass fragments glittering in the sunlight streaming in through the window. His hands were still raised, his left arm trembling violently as he stared through the jagged window pane. He stood there swaying, trying to say something, blood gushing from the hole in his neck and from out of his mouth, his lips twitching uncontrollably. Slowly he sank to the floor, not falling nor even collapsing

but just laying down with weariness.

Seconds later the commotion began. There were shouts outside and curses, the squeaks and rattles and thumps of men running and struggling.

“God damn you! What d’you do that for?”

“Keep your fuckin’ nose out of this.”

“Come on, Boss! Come on!”

“Hey! You!”

There were footsteps out front and then the door burst open. Shoes scraped and pounded, coming inside. Dragline was trying to squeeze himself under the lectern, reaching up to grab the huge Bible and the tablecloth off the top, pulling them over his head. He whimpered and prayed in a low moan, trying not to hear the clear, emphatic voice of the Dog Boy as he yelled out with the excitement of triumph and revenge.

“Here he is, Boss! You got ‘im! You got ’im good! Hey, here’s the other one too. The fat boy hisself. Hidin’ in the back. I’ll git him for you Boss. You got the other one. Let me get this one.”

More footsteps, curses, the sound of a slap.

“Put that thing down, you bastard. Put it down. There’s been enough killin’ here for one day.”

Hands reached into the lectern, grabbed Dragline’s shirt and pulled him to his feet, the Sheriff and his deputy holding his arms with desperate purpose. Dragline saw the Captain standing there inside the door with Boss Paul and Boss Hughes. Boss Godfrey was nearby, his rifle dangling loosely in one hand. A uniformed sergeant of the Highway Patrol grappled with the Dog Boy, slapping him in the face and holding up his gun hand by the wrist.

Breathing heavily, the Sheriff snapped a pair of handcuffs on Dragline and started to hustle him outside. At the same time the two shotgun guards went over to Luke. As soon as

they touched him he struggled to rise to his feet. But he couldn't stand up alone, his left arm and leg shivering, the corner of his lips and his cheek trembling violently.

Dragline was led outside and put in the back seat of the Sheriff's car.

There was a small crowd gathered nearby, a dozen Negroes huddled together, three disheveled men in green uniforms, one of them talking nervously.

"I was on duty. Midnight to eight. Up in the tower. And I saw 'em. Plain. The two of 'em. They were wearin' these striped pants. Sneakin' around behind this here nigger shack. I could see 'em plain in the glasses. There was frost last night. They were puttin' out smudge pots and fires all over the groves. I had to keep my eyes open. You know. You gotta stay on your toes at a time like that. Case some of them fires get outta hand. So I'm lookin' all around. But convicts! Hell, I never figured on seein' no convicts. But there they were. As big as life."

And Dragline heard the sergeant of the Highway Patrol say something to the Captain about providing an escort, about Orlando and the nearest hospital. But then he heard some dry spitting and a slow drawl, the Captain muttering something about not being authorized, about expenses and something about prison hospital.

Luke came out the door of the church supported by both arms between the two guards. And that was the last time that Dragline ever saw him. He was dragged stumbling past the car window, his entire left side twitching and shivering in spasms. They put him in the Captain's black and yellow coupe and put cuffs around his ankles, put a safety belt around his waist and locked his wrists so that his hands dangled securely in his lap. Luke slumped forward, his head hanging at a strange angle, blood running down his neck and over his chest and belly, his mouth trembling but not making a sound.

Then the Captain got in the car and drove off towards Raiford, a hundred and twenty miles away.

28

AFTER LUKE AND DRAGLINE HAD TAKEN OFF with the tool truck the Bull Gang finished up the day. But we doubled up and went out on the Road the next morning with Boss Palmer's gang. Boss Godfrey was missing all day and so was Boss Paul and Boss Hughes. But other than that we didn't know anything about what was going on until after we had checked in that night. Then we found Dragline sitting on the floor next to his bunk, smoking a cigarette, staring down in sullen brooding at the shiny, brand-new set of shackles that were riveted to his ankles.

Silently we listened as Dragline told us about the escape and the shooting. Later in the evening, after the Last bell, Jabo the Cook was let inside the Chute by the Wicker Man. Jabo had been kept up late in order to fix the Captain, who had returned to Camp just after dark, some supper. And it was from Jabo that we got the message, whispered first to Carr and then murmured to the Wicker Man who repeated it to the Dog Boy lying there on his bunk. But the Wicker Man said it loudly enough so that everyone in the Building could hear, speaking in a crude, cruel and rasping manner, his words going right through us.

"WELL, THAT LUKE FELLER IS DEAD. THE ONE YOU BEEN OUT CHASIN' ALL THE TIME. DIED UP AT RAIFORD. RECKON HE AIN'T GONNA GIVE NOBODY NO MORE TROUBLE NOW."

We just lay there in our beds staring up at the ceiling, at the light bulbs, at the shape of the man's body pressing down on the mattress sagging above us. There was no sound; not even the squeaking of bed springs as men rolled over, not a cough nor a fart, not even the sound of

breathing.

And then we heard the stretch and the rub of the Floorwalker's crepe soled shoes and felt the subtle vibration of the Building as he paced back and forth, on guard and alert, wearing away his Time.

29

DRAGLINE FINISHED HIS STORY. HE TOOK A last drag on his butt and flipped it away, drawing up his knees and shifting his feet, the shackles rattling quietly, muffled by the sand and the dust. Fingering the center link, Dragline looked down at the ground. And I knew that his mind had at last relaxed, had let him forget about Luke. Instead he was wondering how much longer it would be before that link finally broke; remembering that the Captain had said that Drag would have to wear those chains until he wore them out.

And he was probably thinking of his own Time, his bad luck and his errors. For if he hadn't agreed to run with Luke that day he would have been home by now. His original sentence was finished a month ago but now he is working on that brand new Five Spot for larceny of State property; in other words, for stealing the tool truck.

But the movement of Dragline's chain was the only sound as the Bull Gang sat there, unmoving, our gestures and expressions awkward and fixed. Our throats were tight, our mouths were dry, our heads were ringing with the melody and the hymn called *Cool Hand Luke*.

Yet we tried to appear casual and tough as our eyes swept over the flimsy shack of a church. We studied the shifting concrete foundation blocks which held the building off the ground, the floor buckling between them. We examined the warped walls, the boards all dried out and cracked with streaks of old paint barely visible in the grain of the wood. We stared at the window which had a gray piece of weather-beaten cardboard inserted in the place of one of the panes. But that blank square spoke with such an

eloquent simplicity that to us it had become as solemn as a window of stained glass reflecting a complex of infinities.

Inside, the choir was still singing. We could hear the swish and the roar of a passing truck back on the road. We could hear the voices of some little colored kids laughing and screaming at each other while swinging through the limbs of a distant mulberry tree. The piano went banging on, the trumpet muted and tremulous. But most of all we listened to the cunning notes of a sly banjo echoing from deep within the shadowed obscurity.

Then we began to get tense, began to stretch and shift our feet. Koko took off his cap and wiped his face with it, put it on his head, pulled it over his left ear, then pulled it over his right ear. He took it off again and mauled it with his hands, putting it on once more, the bill pulled down low over his eyes.

Rabbit and Jim came over and began to carry the bean pot and the bread box and the crate of aluminum dinner plates back to the tool truck. Rabbit went around to the guards and collected their buckets and the orange crates. Together they began to roll up the tarps and put out the coffee fire.

Somebody stood up and went over for a drink of water just before Rabbit took the bucket away. Men began snapping open the lids of their tobacco cans and rolling up their last minute smokes. I began to stretch. I knocked the ashes out of my pipe, filled it again and lit it. I shook the sand out of my shoes and put them back on.

I glanced over and saw Boss Godfrey sit up with a yawn, covering his mouth with the back of his fist as he stretched. With deliberate, probing fingers he dug the big watch out of his pocket and held it in his hand. Yet I couldn't say for certain that he actually looked at it. He didn't turn his head nor nod. His face revealed no expression. And where his eyes should have been I could only see the glittering

surfaces of his glasses and the reflection of ourselves captured therein, a reduced image of the Bull Gang sprawled in a huddle, Dragline sitting in the center.

Boss Godfrey took a cigar out of his shirt pocket. He bit off the end and spat it on the ground. Then he put the cigar in his mouth and lit it. But I didn't know if his movements were profound and thoughtful or whether they were lazy and careless. After a long moment, as though he had forgotten all about work, convicts and Time, finally there was a deep, disinterested growl rumbling from his chest.

"Aw right. Let's go git it. It's that time."

We all stood up, clutching our yo-yos and waiting as Boss Paul, Boss Kean and the other guards began walking off to strategic positions that gave them a good field of fire. There was a moment's hesitation and then all together, without even a signal, we began to wade through the shifting hot sand towards the road and the ditch.

We fell into formation and began swinging our yo-yos back and forth, slowly at first, our hands and arms stiff and cramped, yo-yoing the grass on both sides of the road, the guards scattered, stationed at the cardinal points of the compass. Our easy rhythm began to loosen up, our freshly sharpened yo-yos slicing through the weeds, the soft swishing lulling us once again back to our reverie.

We began our thinking and planning. We imagined, we pretended and we remembered. As we worked our way past the little cemetery next to the church I glanced over at the pathetic graves with their crosses of ordinary lumber, the small lumps of stones, the wilting flowers stuck into mayonnaise jars of water, the stained and weathered photographs encased in glass and fitted in frames.

And as we passed I couldn't help but think of the dead body of Cool Hand Luke. I knew that by the time the officials got around to notifying his relatives he was already buried, carried out the Main Gate and around the corner of

the triple fences of Raiford, interred in that convicts' cemetery which is known to one and all as Gopher Ridge.

I knew that they must have placed a white wooden cross at his grave lettered in black paint with the name Lloyd Jackson and a serial number. And I also knew that before long the paint would crack and peel in the sun and the rains would level the mound of loose sand. Sooner or later the base of the cross would rot and the truck would be hauling in some more boxes and would accidentally knock the cross over, the tires pressing it into the sand.

In a few more minutes the voices singing in the church behind us became dimmer and finally lost in the roar and the whistle of the passing traffic. We worked our way past the sign that read — *Lake County Fire Control Headquarters* — then another sign shaped like a huge badge. Further on we passed a parked green truck that belonged to the forest rangers. Then we cut away the weeds that grew around a concrete anchor for one of the wire stays that supported the watchtower. Again I counted the flights of steps that zigzagged drunkenly up across the sky and towards the eyes hidden there in the clouds. Fifteen.

Then we worked our way past a rusty barbed wire fence, the lightwood posts rotted away at the bottom and leaning at exhausted angles, held up by the very wire they were meant to support.

Fifty feet further on we hit a bare patch of sterile sand on the edge of which was a dead oak tree, the limbs broken off, the stumps hung with a few thin wisps of moss, one side of the trunk charred black from a grass fire leaving a thick, wrinkled scab of charcoal.

The hours passed. We had our Smoking Period and then went back to work. The sun dipped towards the horizon, reflected in a blinding glare from beneath the black hat of the Man With No Eyes. Far away over his shoulder we could still see the watchtower raised up into the clouds.

It got later. We began to steal impatient glances at the Walking Boss, waiting for his growl which would permit us to put away our tools and load up into the cage truck. But he said nothing. Slowly he sauntered up the road behind us, swinging his cane as we yo-yoed past a cow pasture and then a small grove of grapefruit trees and then a *Pepsi Cola* sign.

END

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The Author

Cool Hand Luke was Donn Pearce's first novel, published by Scribners in 1965. Mr. Pearce wrote the original film script for the well known movie based on his novel and is also the author of two later novels, *Pier Head Jump* and *Dying in the Sun*. He has been a machinist's helper, safecracker, convict, third mate in the Merchant Marine, and is currently a private investigator in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

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